

The Moment It Began

The moment when everything comes back
To the moment it began,
And round and round in circles we go,
Dizzy and high-flying; it's pure ecstasy.
Blurred vision didn't hinder the decision
To jump off the cliff of reality -
Diving, dwelling into blue waters of bliss
And lunacy some label imagination.
Remember the talks and the holding of hands,
How the swelling feeling, well, it's swell.
Expands to... oh, hell -
Does it really matter, anyway?
And then, so insanely, believe it or not,
The moment again:
Everything comes back to the moment it began.

Chapter One

Green eyes.

That was the last thing he saw before everything went black.

The blackness was thick, almost like a solid mass pressing on all sides of his body. (Did he still even have a body?) At first, he panicked because he couldn't breathe, but then he supposed breathing wasn't really necessary now that he was dead. He couldn't be sure how long he remained in this state of being in this place and time - if there was any such thing as either of those after life.

But then, the surrounding pressure lessened gradually and kept decreasing, until the point of nothingness, of weightlessness. The blackness turned dark grey to grey to light grey to white, so blindingly white.

His initial impression that he was in hell was now questionable. Heavy blackness could constitute hell, but light, both in terms of mass and brightness?

In front of him materialized a pair of eyes. He had been hoping for green ones, but piercing blue was better than malevolent red. The vividness and sharpness of them was unreal, but those eyes no longer belonged to the living Albus Dumbledore, so their quality could be extraordinary if the laws of super-nature allowed, if there were any such laws.

"Severus," the old man uttered blankly.

Severus Snape found he could nod, but to find his voice was proving difficult. He exhaled, realizing he could breathe again, oddly enough. That one exhalation felt like he was releasing years of pent up anger, frustration, bitterness, sadness, and anything negative he had experienced in life. He breathed in and found himself filled with a strange, almost foreign sensation - hope?

Finally finding his voice, Severus replied, "Dumbledore."

"Yes, my boy," Dumbledore said simply.

Even though he felt better than he had in years, Severus's prickly personality was still there, so he found himself growing quickly annoyed with the old cogder's purposefully vague manner.

"What," he asked pointed, "do you want, Dumbledore? Are you here to issue me to the 'other side,' as it were?"

Dumbledore, in spite of himself, chuckled. "How are you feeling, my dear boy?" came the inquiry from the bearded lips.

With a withering sigh, Severus groaned, "Actually quite well... better than that, in fact, but you still haven't answered my question. If I'm dead, I assume this is the afterlife, and you're here as a sort of required guide."

There was that inane chuckling again. Severus scowled deeply, crossing his arms over his chest, surprised for the first time that he still had a body.

"Well, you see, Severus, that is what I'd like to discuss with you. Few are given the chance to return, to do things over again, but every so often, the Powers That Be grant that special privilege to a person."

His dark brow furrowed, Severus asked, "What are you talking about, Dumbledore?"

Dumbledore's jovial expression left, replaced by a sober one. "You have been dealt a difficult hand to play in life, Severus. Your life was never yours to live, and I am sorry for the part I took in enslaving you to yet another master to serve. You made mistakes, yes, but you did more than enough to right any wrongs you've committed, and yet, your life was still unfairly cut short in a cruel, horrible way. Just when you could have finally been free, you died mere hours before Harry finally defeated Lord Voldemort. What I'm trying to say, my boy, is this: If you were given the chance to live your life over, would you?"

Puzzled, thinking this a joke, a game, for it had to be impossible, Severus said softly, unable to look into Dumbledore's eyes, "Yes, I would... There are so many things I'd change." He paused, remembering his awful childhood, but then meeting Lily, and how she was the light in the darkness of his world. For a few short years, they had been best friends, but he remembered the day when he had ended that sacred connection forever by uttering one word: Mudblood.

"It all fell apart that day I called Lily..." he murmured, unable to finish the sentence.

"Yes," Dumbledore said sadly, nodding slowly. "What you've called your worst memory, if I'm not mistaken."

Severus glared at Dumbledore sharply. "No, you're not mistaken, Dumbledore. So what of it? Are you trying to tell me you have the power to send me back, that I can do things over again? That's impossible."

"I don't possess that power," Dumbledore said serenely, "but there are powers far greater than any man can understand. Yes, Severus, you can return if you like. You will, however, retain all your memories from your past life. Even though you think knowing what you've done

wrong may benefit you in this new life, you may find those old memories haunting. Are you sure you wish to return?"

Severus considered for a time, whether long or short, he couldn't tell. Finally, he said, "Yes."

"Very well," Dumbledore replied, smiling. "Good luck, Severus."

Severus made to blink, and when he opened his eyes, he was dressed as a student once again, outside on the Hogwarts grounds on a sunny afternoon in early summer. He looked over his shoulder and saw James Potter and his gang approaching. He knew the exact date.

This was the day of his worst memory, when everything had spiralled down, down, down afterward.

Chapter Two

"All right, Snivellus?" said James loudly.

Severus inwardly cringed, remembering that horrible name. He looked down at his hands, dropping his bag on the grass, and started grabbing his wand when James shouted, "Expelliarmus!"

Severus groaned as he watched his wand fly into the air and fall with a thud into the grass behind him. Sirius let out a bark of laughter. Severus berated himself for being caught off guard like this. He'd already lived through this *once*. Surely he would have known better than to let James make a fool of him *again*, but Severus knew he hadn't been expecting to be reliving this day, to be starting his life over from this point. Seeing James Potter's taunting, jeering face again made an old hatred burn inside Severus. Why did it have to be this day of all days that had to be his first in his new life?

Then, "Impedimenta!" James said, pointing his wand at Severus, who was now knocked off his feet, halfway through a dive toward his own fallen wand.

For the second time, Severus berated himself. He had the mind, skill, and experience of a grown wizard who had fought in a war, who had been a spy, who had seen more death than any of these other sixteen-year-old boys, and yet, in his younger body, he felt just as awkward and socially inept as he had the first time around. Had nothing changed?

Well, he would make sure things were changed this time around. As Severus lay on the ground panting, James and Sirius advancing on him, wands up, a crowd gathered around. Wormtail was also on his feet now, watching hungrily, edging around the seated Lupin, whose nose was conveniently buried in a book, to get a clearer view.

I ought to just grab my wand and fight back, show them a thing or two, thought Severus savagely, but then he remembered: Lily *needed* to come to his rescue. If he fought off the other boys on his own, she would never come, and he would never right the wrong that had messed everything up forever. Reluctantly, Severus swallowed his pride and allowed the boys to have their fun at his expense... for now.

"How'd the exam go, Snively?" said James.

"I was watching him - his nose was touching the parchment," said Sirius viciously. "There'll be great grease marks all over it; they won't be able to read a word."

Several people watching laughed. Wormtail, the little rat, sniggered shrilly. Severus tried to get up, but the jinx was still operating on him; he was struggling, as though bound by invisible ropes.

"You - wait," he panted, staring up at James with an expression of purest loathing. "You - wait... until I... prove you lot all wrong."

Severus smirked inside. He had been able to finish the sentence this time around.

"That's rich, coming from you," said Sirius coolly. "What're you going to prove, Snively? That your nose is the largest in the world?"

In spite of himself, for seeing James and Sirius alive and tormenting him once again was humiliating beyond anything he could imagine, Severus swore loudly and tried to utter hexes, but with his wand still ten feet away, nothing happened.

"Wash out your mouth," said James coldly. "Scourgify!"

Pink soup bubbles streamed from Severus's mouth at once; the froth was covering his lips, making him gag, choking him, but he endured it, for he knew what would happen next...

"Leave him ALONE!"

Severus glanced in the direction of her voice, and his black eyes settled upon young Lily Evans. She was ever as beautiful as he remembered, and more. His heart thudded heavily inside with unbound emotion.

Lily... oh, Lily...

James and Sirius were also looking around. James's free hand jumped, much to Severus's dismay, to his hair. He purposefully messed it up.

"All right, Evans?" said James, trying to sound mature and impressive.

"Leave him alone," Lily repeated. She was looking at James with every sign of great dislike, and Severus felt his heart skip a beat. "What's he done to you?"

"Well," said James, appearing to deliberate the point, "it's more the fact that he *exists*, if you know what I mean..."

Many of the surrounding watchers laughed, Sirius and Wormtail included, but Lupin, still apparently intent on his book, didn't, and neither did Lily. Severus took notice of Lupin's behavior this time around and realized that perhaps Lupin had never been as bad as the others, but right now, he had eyes only for Lily.

"You think you're funny," she said coldly. "But you're just an arrogant, bullying toerag, Potter. Leave him *alone*."

"I will if you go out with me, Evans," said James quickly. "Go on... Go out with me, and I'll never lay a wand on old Snively again."

Severus felt the Impediment Jinx wearing off now. He inched toward his wand, spitting out soupsuds as he crawled.

"I wouldn't go out with you if it was a choice between you and the giant squid," said Lily.

Severus beamed on the inside. He was so proud of Lily. Seeing her stand up to James like that only endeared her to him more.

"Bad luck, Prongs," said Sirius briskly, turning back to Severus. "OY!"

Severus had directed his wand straight at James, knocking him off his feet. James recovered too quickly, and Severus wondered if he shouldn't have used Sectumsempra like last time, but he didn't want to resort to using Dark Magic. Next thing he knew, Severus was hanging upside down in the air, his robes falling over his head, and

he knew his skinny, pallid legs and greying underpants were being exposed for all the school to see.

He endured this utter humiliation because he knew he had to. Only a little longer, now...

Many people in the small crowd watching cheered. Sirius, James, and Wormtail roared with laughter.

Lily's voice came again: "Let him down!"

Certainly," said James, and he jerked his wand upward. Severus fell into a crumpled heap on the ground. Disentangling himself from his robes, he got quickly to his feet, wand up, but Sirius said, "Locomotor mortis!" and Severus keeled over again at once, rigid as a board.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!" Lily shouted. She had her own wand out now. James and Sirius eyed it warily.

"Ah, Evans, don't make me hex you," said James earnestly.

"Take the curse off him, then!"

James sighed deeply, then turned to Severus and muttered the countercurse.

"There you go," he said, as Severus struggled to his feet again. "You're lucky Evans was here, Snivellus -"

"I don't-" Severus started to say. "I don't need your help, Lily," he stated firmly, looking at Lily instead of James. He was still far too embarrassed to dare thank her in front of the others, but at least he had not called her a Mudblood. That word would never taint his lips again. His eyes gazed into Lily's, but she still looked hurt because he had refused her help.

Oh, God, no, Severus pleaded. Please, please, please, Lily... don't hate me.

Lily turned and ran away, leaving Severus prey to the Marauders again, but they were *not* going to humiliate him further, not this time!

He was so quick with his wand, they hadn't seen it coming. All four of them, including Lupin for good measure, were Stupefied within five seconds. Smirking, Severus left the scene, leaving a stunned crowd behind.

That'll show them I can handle myself... four teenagers against a grown wizard... ha.

Severus sobered as he neared the castle. While he had saved himself the horrible embarrassment of being completely depants-ed in front of the school, he was still concerned about Lily. He wasn't sure where he would find her, but he remembered one of their favorite meeting spots, a broom closet on the fifth floor, and went there.

He tentatively reached for the handle when he reached his destination. If Lily was behind this door, he would be speaking with her for the first time in years, only she didn't know that. He couldn't act like the adult Severus. Trying to remember what it was like to be a teenager again, Severus sighed and opened the door. There she was. Lily glared at him with red eyes. A pang of guilt hit him. Her eyes looked so accusing.

If only you knew all the things you have a right to accuse me for, Severus thought bitterly. *I killed you, Lily.*

The desperation must have shown on his face, for Lily's expression softened as she asked, "Sev, are you... all right?"

"Me?" he asked bitterly. "Lily, I... I-"

There were a million things he wanted to say to her... to beg for her forgiveness and to confess his love, but he knew he would only scare her. This sixteen-year-old girl sitting in front of him knew nothing of what had happened in that other world.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "I didn't mean for you to cry."

He sat down next to her, and Lily released a choked sob, reaching for his hand with hers. "Oh, Sev... when will you learn that I'm only trying to help? I know you're perfectly capable to taking care of yourself,

but... but I hate to see them treat you this way. Potter is just plain awful... saying you deserve to be tormented because you exist. That's a terrible thing to say to someone."

As she spoke such kind words, Severus felt like he deserved none of them. In spite of himself, he muttered, "Maybe he's right."

"What?" asked Lily, aghast, her grip tightening on his hand. She took her other hand and forced him to meet her eyes. Glaring at him, she stated, "Don't you *ever* say that, Severus Snape. You're worth twelve of Potter any day of the week. He doesn't know you like I know you."

"Thank Merlin for that," Severus quipped, smirking, unable to help himself. "I wouldn't want Potter sitting in a broom closet with me, holding my hand."

Lily smiled and giggled. "Really, Sev... I mean it. You're my best friend... You're witty in your own way, and you're brilliant. You shared this world with me before anyone else, and I'll always have you to thank for that."

"Yes, well... I try," Severus said awkwardly, overwhelmed by emotion.

They sat there in silence for a while, holding hands. After a while, Severus whispered, "I'm sorry again... for making you cry back there. I do appreciate what you were doing for me. Thank you, Lily."

Stunned, Lily joked, "And when did you start dishing out such gratitude, Sev?"

"Right now," he said confidently. "Right now, Lily."

Author's Note: Much of this chapter is based on chapter 28, "Snape's Worst Memory," from *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, p. 645-648. Several lines are directly taken from the original text or changed somewhat.

Lily's statement to Severus about him being worth "twelve of Potter" is a reference to Harry's statement to Neville in *Philosopher's Stone* about him being worth "twelve of Malfoy." I always loved that line.

Chapter Three

Later that day, Severus was back in the Slytherin dormitory. His fellow Slytherins had yet to join him in their room. As he looked around at the familiar yet foreign surroundings, he felt very out of place. As a teacher, he had rarely gone into the dormitories, only stayed in the common room.

Now, standing in front of a mirror, Severus took in his younger self's appearance for the first time in this new life. There was nothing different about the way he looked from his previous life, but still, to suddenly be seeing himself only sixteen when seemingly yesterday he had been thirty-eight was shocking. He simply looked so... young.

Not that he'd been old when he had died, especially by wizard standards, but Severus realized now just how prematurely aged his face had looked before. He could have easily passed for a man ten years old than his age. He supposed years of being a double agent during the war and teaching idiotic students hadn't helped matters any.

Severus scowled at himself now. Yes, his mouth could still form the same thin-lipped expressions. His eyes were as ever like tunnels as they had been in the past. His nose was still... his large, hooked nose. He sighed.

He knew he ought to be happy. He had just spent a couple of hours with his Lily. So what was wrong with him? Still frowning at himself, he realized he never really cared much about his physical appearance... until now. Now, that was strange. Lily had been friends with him because she cared about him on the inside, not because of what he looked like. Why was he being so shallow?

Severus Snape was *not* shallow. Maybe he felt he had a reason to care more now. He knew he'd never be handsome, but he could at least wash his hair every day, he supposed... and perhaps not scowl and sneer as much. To see a younger, untainted face reminded him that he was being given the chance to start over, so why waste it?

Severus left the room and went to the bathroom, washing his hair vigorously, twice through. He had found a small bottle of conditioner

among his things, not sure where it had come from, and decided to try it. When he was finished and dry, he looked in the mirror, amazed at how soft and clean his hair looked as it fell just beyond his shoulders. Reaching up, he felt a lock. It really was soft and clean!

He smiled slightly at himself, only to be interrupted.

"Hey, Severus! What're you doing? Admiring yourself?"

Severus recognized the sneering voice of his supposed friend, Mulciber. He turned and regarded the other boy. Mulciber was muscular and tall, a threatening-looking young man, to be sure. Michael Mulciber used his brute force to exert control over others, and Severus remembered now that he was only "friends" with him because he'd offered to help him with his studies (more like do his homework for him) if Mulciber agreed to help defend him from the Marauders. In the years that followed, Mulciber, intrigued by Severus's vast knowledge of things, dumbly held on to every word he said about Dark Magic.

Severus turned away from the mirror and made his way toward the door, not in the mood to talk with Mulciber. If he was to have any real chance with Lily, he knew he couldn't go being friends with the likes of Mulciber and Avery. He pointedly ignored him as he stalked past and returned to his room.

A few minutes later, Mulciber entered the room and slumped unceremoniously onto his bed. Avery came in a minute later. It was obvious the two of them had been talking before coming into the room.

"Oy, Severus," Avery called. "Mulciber said you've been ignoring him. Got something up your arse you don't wanna share with us? We heard what happened to you today down by the lake..."

"Shut it, Avery," Severus snapped, annoyed.

Avery smirked, and Mulciber released a series of guffaws. "Ooo, touched a tender soft, have we?" Mulciber teased.

With a quiet groan, Severus pulled the curtains closed around his four-poster bed and charmed them shut so no one could open them and bother him. He muttered another charm to silence the ruckus coming from the two dunderheads and forced himself to relax. As he drifted into slumber, Severus wondered how he could have been so daft as to have been friends with people like Mulciber and Avery. With the hindsight he now possessed, he could plainly see they only wanted to be "friends" with him because he could give them something they craved: his knowledge. They had fed on it like maggots on rotting flesh.

Scorning himself for being so naive, Severus realized he had only sought their company because they, too, offered something: their supposed protection. They were seldom there to save him from James Potter and Sirius Black, though, and he knew they found it just as humorous as the Marauders that he was an unpopular kid who was picked on for being different.

You really were an idiot, Severus, he chided himself. You had Lily, whose love you rejected because you never understood how she could love someone like you... because you felt like you needed to prove yourself to the world and be bloody important... and look where it got you. You'd best not blow it this time around.

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A few days later, after their O.W.L. examinations were completed, Severus and Lily were boarding the Hogwarts Express, ready to head home for the summer. The past few days had been taxing for poor Severus. While his Potions exam was extremely easy because of his vast knowledge of the subject, his Transfigurations and Charms exams proved more difficult. It had been years since he'd been a student expected to take tests, and neither of those had been his strongest subject. He figured he would still earn an "A" in each subject, at least.

He'd tried to distance himself as much as possible from the likes of Avery and Mulciber as well. Thankfully, the fifth years were required to spend most of their time taking their O.W.L.s, but when he wasn't doing that, Severus would hide in the library, usually studying with

Lily. He smiled fondly to himself, thinking of all the wonderful conversations he'd had with Lily this past week. Now, he would have the entire summer to spend with her.

He wasn't looking forward to returning to Spinner's End, though. With the mind of a grown wizard, it would prove difficult not to perform underage magic in his sixteen-year-old body, and he didn't want to see his father again. He'd hated the man in his past life, and he doubted anything would change about that now.

Lily and he were now seated in a compartment by themselves. Severus doubted anyone else would join them unless they had no choice. Thankful for the seclusion, he allowed himself to relax and released a deep sigh.

"Are you glad the year is over, too?" asked Lily, smiling at him from across the compartment.

"Yes," he admitted softly. "What a year, huh? Only two years left and then what?"

It was weird to be thinking about his future as being so open. He wasn't about to join the Death Eaters and ruin both his life and Lily's. Because of that, he would never have to spy for Dumbledore or work at Hogwarts. He figured he might do research, but he had time to think about it.

Lily shrugged. "I don't know... It's funny how fast five years have already gone. I remember how anxious I was my first day. You were so excited when you got on the train that day..."

"Yeah," Severus sighed, thinking how naive he had been. "And you were upset at me because of your sister."

Lily thought back to that day and laughed, rolling her eyes at the thought of Petunia. "You were so adorable, Sev... You should've seen the way your eyes lit up whenever you talked about Hogwarts when you were little."

Severus blushed a little at her words. She thought him adorable, at least when he was a kid? He snorted. "Only you would say something like that."

Lily smiled and reached for his hand with hers. She searched his eyes with hers, saying as she sobered, "You've been... different this past week, Sev."

"Different?" he queried, wondering if it was that obvious. *Not like I'm about to tell her I'm reliving my life.*

"Yes," she said. "In a good way, I mean. I was so worried about you the past couple of years, Sev... I mean, you were hanging around with Mulciber and Avery, involving yourself in the wrong crowd. Maybe I'm wrong, and I hope I am, but that group of people is going to go bad, I just know it. You-Know-Who is getting stronger by the day, and people like that are going to line up to join him. The thought of you..."

Severus knew what she was trying to say, for it had proven true in his past life. He knew the dire consequences of joining the Death Eaters: a life of servitude, Lily's death, and ultimately his death. A miserable existence. Not a life at all, but a mere sorry excuse for one.

He brought his other hand up and laid it on top of hers. "Hey," he said gently, "don't worry. That's not going to happen. I'm sorry I ever hung around with those gits. They were never real friends, anyway. They were only impressed with my knowledge of... er, Dark Magic."

"Why do you know so much Dark Magic, anyway, Sev?" Lily asked. "You're a good person. You don't need to resort to using that sort of thing."

He shook his head sadly. "You don't understand, Lily. It's not a matter of wanting to learn it because... because I want to use it. I admit that a part of me is intrigued, but I think it's fair to say that you need to know the Dark side to understand the Light side better. How can you teach Defense Against the Dark Arts without knowledge of the Dark Arts? I'm not saying it's okay to use them, except maybe in extreme circumstances, but... well... I guess part of me just wanted to feel important."

Lily squeezed his hand gently. "You know what, Sev? You *are* important, at least to me, and I don't think you need to do anything to change yourself. I like you, a lot. You're my best friend."

Severus's heart clenched, and he swallowed down a lump in his throat. He would not cry; he would *not* cry in front of Lily. But he couldn't help the tears he felt forming in the corners of his eyes.

If only you knew the truth, Lily... how I betrayed you to the Dark Lord... how I betrayed your friendship...

"Hey, hey," Lily said gingerly, reaching to brush a fallen tear from his face. "Sev, what's the matter?"

"You- you know I love you, don't you, Lily?" he whispered.

Lily knew he cared about her deeply and liked her as his best friend, but she had a feeling he meant something more than that. "Y-you do?" she asked.

"Yes."

Lily hadn't really thought of Severus in such a way... as a boyfriend, but that was because they'd been friends since childhood. When she stopped and thought about it, she knew there was no one else in her life like him. She told him everything, spent time just sitting in companionable silence with him, held his hand, had seen his laughter and tears. He only ever really opened up around her, so she now realized she did love him.

"I think I love you, too, Sev."

Severus felt his heart flutter. He wanted to jump about the compartment like a little kid on Christmas morning who had just received his favorite toy, but he refrained for the sheer fact of not wanting to make an ass out of himself.

"I think this summer is going to be just fine, then," Severus quipped, in a much better mood.

Chapter Four

As Severus entered his house on Spinner's End, it was with dread. He didn't want to see his father again. Even Potter's infuriated look he'd given him when Severus had stepped off the train with Lily was laughable compared to his bloody father. It was ridiculous, really, to be filled with such dread, but the grown Severus had no fond memories of the man who had been the reason he first starting hating Muggles.

When he entered, his mother, who had come to the train station to pick him up, silently stepped into the kitchen to begin preparing dinner. Eileen Prince Snape hadn't so much as met her son's eyes or spoken one word of greeting to him. Severus regarded her retreating form with a mixture of sadness and anger. It was because of his father that his mother had become a shell of her former self.

Severus glanced into the sitting room, finding his father lounging on the couch, whether asleep or awake, he couldn't tell. The television was on, but the volume had been turned down. Several empty glass bottles were strewn about the floor in front of the couch, and even more littered the end table near Tobias Snape's head.

Severus scowled at the pathetic man. Everything was just as he had remembered: It was typical to find his father passed out on the couch after another drinking binge. As Severus turned away and made his way up the stairs to his forlorn bedroom, he remembered that by the time he was sixteen, his father was only going to work at the mill half of the time. His drinking had consumed his life, which meant dealing with a violent, raging alcoholic who mentally, and sometimes physically, abused his wife and son.

Severus entered his old room and threw his things thoughtlessly on the floor. He fell onto the bed with a heavy thump and closed his eyes, releasing a long-held sigh. He didn't want to go back downstairs. He wanted to run away and convince Lily to do the same, but he knew putting Lily in that amount of danger was beyond foolish.

Lord Voldemort was a real threat again, and two underage wizards roaming the countryside on their own was ridiculous. Despite Voldemort and his Slytherin "friends" trying to convince him toward

the Dark side, the Marauders with their relentless taunting and tormenting, and his abusive drunk of a father, Severus was happier than he had been in a long time. He had Lily. Perhaps that was all that mattered.

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A few days later, Severus was having his doubts. Two days after returning home, Lily had gone on holiday with her family, so he hadn't seen her in three days now. As much as he had been looking forward to being away from Potter and his gang this summer, he now realized he couldn't have complete peace.

A part of his mind raged at the unfairness of it all. I choose to relive my damned life, and what good comes of it? Sure, I have Lily, but nothing else has changed! I thought having Lily would make everything else... better... but who was I kidding?

Severus spent most of the days either taking long walks or pacing his room. He didn't have the inclination or the patience to sit and read, which would have normally brought him enjoyment. He refused to eat meals in the presence of his father, and so, despite the pain he guiltily knew it caused his mother, he would retreat up to his room, a small plate of whatever sustenance had been provided in his hands, only to listen to his father's threats to the back of his head.

Today, in the midst of pacing his bedroom, Severus stopped, thinking he heard banging coming from below. It was growing louder, and he knew that Tobias Snape had finally grown intolerant of his son's petulant behavior. The incessant noise grew in intensity until a resounding knock came from the door. By instinct, Severus reached for his wand.

"Go away," he told the door, trying to sound bored, as if his father were merely wasting his time.

"Open the door, boy," Tobias's deep voice boomed.

"I said," repeated Severus pointedly, "to go away. I have nothing to say to you... Father." He spat the last word contemptuously, like it left a bad taste in his mouth.

Tobias kicked the door, which rattled it, but it didn't open. Severus, knowing it was pointless to ask the man to go away a third time, went to the door and opened it with a violent tug. Standing there, slightly taller than his son, was Tobias Snape. His eyes were bloodshot and narrowed as he peered down the end of his hooked nose at his son. Severus, on reflex, shoved his wand directly into his father's face, touching the end of said nose.

"I thought I told you to leave me alone," Severus hissed. While he would have rarely had the courage to address his father in this manner before, Severus was a changed man now. He'd dealt with far worse.

Tobias sneered at Severus. "I should've snapped your wand years ago like I did your mother's. You're a disgrace, the lot of you wizards and witches. Your filthy mother never told me what I was getting myself into, and then, nine months after she forced my hand, she spat out *you*. A waste of space if I've ever seen one."

"Shut up!" Severus yelled, pushing his wand farther into his father's face. "The only one who's a disgrace around here is *you*. You've ruined Mother, but you're not going to touch me, Father. And next time you touch Mum, I'll make sure you thoroughly regret it. You've no idea what I'm capable of."

Tobias now looked slightly frightened and took a step back. Pointing a trembling hand at his son, he stuttered, "You won't dare use magic outside of school. You think I don't know what they'll do to you if you do? Pathetic, little freak you are. Disgrace. A disgrace."

Tobias turned away, muttering under his breath. Every word Severus had just been forced to endure had been slurred. The air had been tinged with bad breath and alcohol just moments ago, making Severus wrinkle his nose in disgust. He slammed the door shut and almost warded his room, but stopped himself in time.

"What good is having a wand if you can't use it?" he asked bitterly, throwing it to the floor.

Furious with the whole situation, Severus flung himself onto his bed once again and drifted into a fitful sleep.

x x x x x

Three days later, Lily was back. Severus met her near the playground in their usual spot. He hated having to wear Muggle clothing, especially mismatched things that had been tainted by his father's filthy skin, but Severus knew wearing robes in a Muggle neighborhood would be further cause for people to give him strange looks.

The first time he had stepped into a pair of his father's old jeans and pulled a faded, holey red shirt over his head, Severus had felt extremely odd. He hadn't worn Muggle clothing in years. Whenever he was home, he insisted on wearing robes, which gave Tobias yet another reason to bad-mouth him. Now, with Lily's green eyes there to greet him, Severus tried to push those negative thoughts to the back of his mind.

Lily immediately threw her arms around him, and he hugged her in return.

"I've missed you," he said softly into her red hair.

"I've missed you, too," Lily replied. "But I'm back now, so we have the whole summer ahead of us."

Severus nodded, still distracted by thoughts of his father. One cynical thought led to another, and before long, Severus was dwelling on all matters of negativity. He was quiet as they walked along. Severus noticed a man working in a nearby yard glaring at him.

"Sev, what's wrong?" Lily finally asked.

"Nothing worth talking about," he muttered. *You'd just think I'm feeling sorry for myself, and I'm tired of looking like such a sodding weakling in front of you, Lily.*

"You're a bad liar, Sev," Lily said.

Actually, Lily, I'm a pretty damned good one. You just don't know that yet. Years of employing Occlumency in the presence of the Dark Lord made Severus Snape one of the best liars around, but his sixteen-

year-old self wasn't supposed to know how to block his thoughts and feelings from others.

"Look, it's nothing," he insisted vehemently.

Lily, taken aback by the bite in his tone, withdrew her hand from his. She had seen him in sour moods on several occasions, but just a week ago on the train, he'd been incredibly open and sweet toward her.

"I... I don't know what to say to you, Sev," she said, clearly disappointed. "I thought you had changed... that you were turning over a new leaf, but if you can't be bothered to tell your *best friend*," she sneered the words in a very uncharacteristic fashion, "the truth, then perhaps I'll just leave you alone until you're ready."

"Lily-" Severus started to say, but it was too late. Lily had already left him standing there, alone and pathetic.

Severus scowled and mentally berated himself. The man in the nearby yard was still glaring at him as if his presence on the sidewalk were somehow contaminating it.

"What're you looking at?" Severus shouted at the man. "Come to have a good look at the neighborhood freak?"

The man flushed and turned his attention to pruning a tree once again, and Severus retreated into the shadows of the forest. He found the spot he used to visit whenever he needed to be alone in his youth. Sitting down, he leaned against the rough bark of a tree.

Nothing had changed. He was wasting this life just like he had his earlier life. No matter what he did or how hard he tried, he always managed to ruin things. Lily, for whatever insane reason, had claimed to see the good in him, but as he thought about his father, the neighbors, his classmates, and everybody else but Lily, Severus came to the stark, cruel realization that they had to be right about him: He was a freak.

Chapter Five

Severus spent the next two days confined to his room, much in the same manner before Lily had returned. It was easier to delude himself by thinking she was still away. When he became especially restless in his loneliness, he was almost tempted to go to her house and apologize for his behavior a few days ago... almost. His pride kept him restrained.

Severus wondered if Lily might come to him first. Hadn't she been too quick to judge, after all? She had barely given him a chance to explain his rotten mood. Of course, he'd held back, too ashamed to tell her the truth, but she was Lily... Did she think he wouldn't tell her at all?

He was pacing his room as he was wont to do, and in his growing frustration, Severus kicked the wall. Thankfully, his father was at work today. He didn't care if it would get him in trouble; if his father dared bother him again, Severus probably would have hexed him.

Why was Lily acting so immature? he thought for the hundredth time.

Scowling, he stopped pacing. He knew the answer to that question. She was sixteen. He was, at least mentally, thirty-eight. His memories of her had been from when he'd been much younger. A part of him knew he hadn't acted very mature, either, but again, his damned pride wouldn't let him admit that to her and apologize.

His stomach suddenly growled loudly, and Severus realized he had hardly eaten anything the past couple of days. In fact, he had let himself go... He knew he probably smelled, too. No shower, next to no food, and hardly any sleep. He was quite a wreck.

Sighing, Severus went to the door and proceeded downstairs to the kitchen. He found his mother seated at the table, staring blankly at the surface. No plate of food or mug of coffee or newspaper or book sat in front of her. She was just looking at... nothing.

"Mum?" ventured Severus.

Eileen didn't respond. She didn't even acknowledge the presence of another individual in the room, let alone her son. Had she truly grown so numb to the external world?

A pang of guilt suffused Severus. In his other life, while he had been concerned about his mother when he was a child, the older he had gotten, the less he could be bothered to care about her. He had closed himself in, feeling sorry mostly for himself, and refusing to submit the smallest amount of compassion on another person, with the exception of Lily... until he had pushed her away as well. His mother had become a messy spot on the wall, a wall which he'd pushed to the background and built several walls in front, separating himself from the reality of the pain, too embarrassed, too prideful, too weak to confront it.

Now, seeing his mother in this dire state, Severus realized he had neglected her just as much as she had neglected him. She hadn't been much of a mother in his teen years, but he remembered fondly, and sadly, that she had once loved him. As a child, she had done what she could to protect him from Tobias. She had been kind to him.

Forgetting his hunger, Severus went to his mother and reached for her hand with his own. "Mother," he implored. "Will you not even look at your son?"

Severus thought he saw the smallest flicker of life in her dark eyes, eyes so much like his own. Her long black hair hung limply around her thin face, as if she was trying to hide. Severus felt he could understand her by her facial features and composure alone. He had inherited not only many of her physical characteristics, but he knew what it was to be forced to the point of unfeeling. He knew, however, that no matter how stoic and closed he could be to the rest of the world, his feelings was buried deep within. He knew his mother had to be alive inside somewhere... somewhere hidden.

Then, a tear trickled down Eileen's cheek. Her face didn't betray any feeling, however. Severus felt the weight of her suffering, the tear like a torrential downpouring of affliction meant to drown them.

"Mum, please," Severus nearly begged, trying to keep his voice from breaking. He brought his other hand to her face and forced her to look at him.

"Severus," Eileen whispered, her thin lips hardly moving.

"Yes, Mum, that's right. It's your son, Severus."

Eileen didn't say anything.

"Listen to me, Mum. You've got to snap out of this," Severus said. He paused, thinking what he could possibly say to help. "What's he done to you?"

Severus thought he saw something register in his eyes again. "Tobias?" she croaked, her vocal chords out of use.

"Yes, him," Severus said contemptuously. "He's ruined you, Mum, and you know it. Why do you stay with him? He's destroying himself and his family. He's supposed to have a responsibility to us, but he's throwing his money and time away on drink... and I know he beats you. He's already taken any your wand so you can't do magic. He's taking away your sanity now... He's taking *you* away, Mum. Why do you let him do it?"

The anguish on Eileen's face was evident as she contorted it as if in pain and withdrew her hand from her son's. "He's my husband, Severus," she said softly. "He can't help it... He's got a problem. He..." She stopped, but when she resumed, she spoke more harshly, her defensiveness increasing, "I love him, Severus. How- how could you- ?"

Feeling betrayed, Severus stated hurtfully, "You love him? And you think he honestly loves you?" he spat, standing to his full height, towering over her. "No man who acts like him deserves any respect, and yet you let him control you like a puppet. What have you become, Mother? What's he done to you?" Severus's voice was breaking again, but he refused to cry. "You... you could leave him, you know... We could both leave. Come on, Mum, what's holding us back? Let's leave before-" *Before it's too late.*

Eileen was staring at the wall now. What life had been in her eyes moments ago was gone. Severus sighed in defeat, knowing she was already too far gone. Some things, it seemed, were impossible to change. Resigning himself to another smack of reality to his face, Severus returned to his room, his hunger forgotten, but his mind whirling with thoughts about the cruel way of things.

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He wasn't sure how he managed it, but Severus endured five more days of complete isolation before he finally gave in and went to talk with Lily. Before he left his room, he glanced at his unkempt appearance in the mirror. Had he been in a good mood, he would have cared enough to shower and change his clothes, but dirty looks from the neighbors were the least of his worries as he walked down the street toward her house.

Lily lived in the nicest part of the neighborhood, which was several blocks from his home. The Snapes lived in the dumpiest part, as Petunia had rudely pointed out on several occasions. When he turned onto Lily's street, he knew he stood out even more than he would have on the other streets. Everyone had green, pruned lawns and big, clean houses on Webber St.

Severus found the Evans house and stopped at the bottom of the driveway. Mr. Evans would be at work at this time, and it looked like Mrs. Evans's car was absent from the driveway as well.

As Severus strode up the driveway to the house, he thought, *At least her parents won't be around.*

He was now standing on the front porch. With some hesitation, he pressed the doorbell. It rang, and a few seconds later, he heard footsteps approaching the door. Holding his breath, he hoped it would be Lily and not her infernal sister, Petunia.

No such luck. Petunia's horselike face was staring at him, frowning deeply. "What are *you* doing here?" she asked distastefully.

"I'm here to see Lily," Severus replied, trying to keep his voice even.

"Well, she doesn't want to see you," Petunia said nastily. "What did you do to her this time? Whatever it was, you've really pressed the wrong buttons."

"Look," Severus said firmly, "I'm not interested in playing a game of trading insults with you, Petunia. I need to see Lily... now."

He was about to forcefully shove his way past Petunia when Lily's voice came from within the house. "Petunia, who is it? Who's at the door?"

"No one," Petunia said nonchalantly.

"I don't believe you," Lily said with a hint of impatience in her voice. Lily came to stand next to Petunia. Her green eyes widened slightly in surprise upon seeing Severus.

"Like I told you," Petunia sneered, "no one."

"Oh, shut up, Petunia," Lily said, rolling her eyes.

Petunia left with a huff of indignance, leaving Lily staring back at Severus with raised eyebrows. "Well," she said, "did you want something, Severus?"

Noticing that she had used his full name, which she rarely did, Severus inwardly sighed. She was still mad at him, then. Even Petunia was no longer "Tuney," although Severus had thought the nickname to be childish, anyway.

"Yes," Severus said stiffly, feeling defensive. "I came to... to apologize."

If Lily's eyebrows could have gone any farther up her forehead, they would have disappeared into her hairline. "Really?" she asked sardonically. "You don't sound very sorry."

Severus was about to turn away, figuring it had been a mistake to come here. He'd been wondering all week if it had been a colossal mistake to relive his life. Who was he fooling but himself by thinking he could change anything? Withholding one mere word, even if it was

something as foul as "Mudblood," couldn't possibly change the outcome of his life. Severus knew life wasn't that simple, but he'd thought that was the point when everything had gone downhill. He knew he would have to work hard and make better choices in this new life if he expected it to be better. Things didn't just fall into place.

As Severus gazed into her green eyes, however, he remembered seeing Harry's eyes just before dying. Strange, but that other life seemed foreign and distant now. There was no Harry Potter in this world.

"Please try to understand," Severus insisted. "I didn't want to talk about what was bothering me that day because, because... it's nothing new, all right? You already know my parents used to fight all the time, and things are worse now. I don't like talking about my life at home."

Lily's expression softened a little as she stepped out of the house and onto the porch. She examined Severus's disheveled, dirty appearance, unable to refrain from wrinkling her nose.

"When's the last time you showered?" she bluntly asked. She smiled just the smallest bit.

Severus's mouth twitched a little on one side. "You probably don't want to know," he said wryly.

Lily reached for his hand and led him to the rocker the Evanses had on their front porch. They sat down, side by side, and Lily said, "You know, if you would have come an hour after what happened that day, I would have talked with you. Why did you wait so long?"

"I'm sorry, Lily. I kept hoping you would come to me. I didn't want to be the first to admit defeat, I guess."

"It's not about admitting defeat, Sev," Lily said softly. "You make it sound like I'd never talk to you again."

"Well, I... I didn't know," he murmured.

"Really, Sev," she said in earnest. "What could you ever do to make me stop being your friend?"

I can think of a few things.

He didn't answer that question. He didn't want to. Lily hadn't said in words that she'd forgiven him, and while a part of him wanted to hold on to the fact that she should have apologized for leaving him alone that day, he didn't want to throw away his friendship over what had been a misunderstanding. He knew he was a difficult person to get along with, and with Lily at his side, he felt forgiveness didn't need to be spoken.

For now, at least, this was enough.

Chapter Six

After seeing Lily that day, Severus returned home to find his father passed out on the couch, and his mother was still sitting at the kitchen table. He wondered if she had even moved since seeing her there earlier, but seeing a pot of something cooking on the stove, he knew she had. His father would have never cooked dinner.

It was tempting to just go up to his room like always, but whatever was cooking was now threatening to boil over, and Eileen hadn't bothered to move. Severus went into the kitchen and removed the pot from the heat, finding chicken noodle soup inside. He quietly went about placing a bowl in front of his mother and setting two other places. He knew his father wouldn't be joining them any time soon, but when Tobias woke hours later, he would be demanding where his dinner was. Severus was glad his father would not be an issue that evening. For once, he would try eating at the kitchen table with his mother, the closest thing to a normal family meal he could have.

After everything was ready, Severus took the seat across the small table and surveyed his mother. Eileen hadn't touched the soup yet, nor did she seem to even notice it was there. Severus, feeling a pang of guilt surface again, watched her for a minute, looking for any sign of recognition. She was alive and breathing, but to him, she already seemed dead.

Dead... Severus inwardly cringed. He remembered clearly how she had died, and he wondered if there wasn't something he could have done to save her. He pushed all thoughts of her death in another life out of his mind, too ashamed to focus on them further now. This was his chance, wasn't it? He'd wanted to live his life over, and now was the opportunity to right what had gone wrong before... and that didn't just mean in regards to Lily.

Hating himself for being so selfish since his arrival back home, for Severus knew sequestering himself to his room for days and brooding about the unfairness of his life were the exact same things he'd done when he was a teenager before, Severus made a choice in this moment to be a man. He was a grown wizard, for Merlin's sake.

He had been through more in his relatively short life than most people ever would. What had he learned from those experiences?

Life wasn't fair. Well, if that much wasn't already strikingly obvious, he didn't know what was. Life may not have been fair, but life was always what one made of it. Now, Severus knew he had a choice. What would he make of his life?

He reached across the table, clasping Eileen's cold hand in his own. "Mum, listen to me," he implored firmly. "It's me again, your son, Severus. Will you please eat your dinner? I'll be here, Mum; I'll be sitting right here with you. Eat your dinner, Mum... please."

Just when he thought he might have to ask again, Eileen nodded perceptibly and reached for the spoon with her other hand. She picked it up and slowly took of spoonful of soup and swallowed it. Severus didn't let go of her hand. He wasn't sure why, but it seemed to help her if he held on. He watched as she ate the entire bowl before releasing his grip.

He then ate his soup in silence, his dark eyes flickering to his mother every few seconds to see how she was faring. She had managed to pick up her cup of tea and take a few careful sips from it. He was encouraged by every movement she made, as if he were a father teaching his child how to walk.

Severus was almost finished eating, thinking the whole meal would pass in silence, when Eileen spoke. "Where did you go today, Severus?"

Something inside him swelled with joy. She had asked a question of her own volition, no prompting on his part.

"Do you remember Lily Evans, Mum?" he asked. When she nodded, he continued, "Well, there's your answer. I went to visit her."

"Ah," Eileen said delicately. She paused so long that Severus assumed she was done speaking, but then she asked, "She's the pretty girl whose family is Muggle, correct?"

"Yes," Severus replied carefully. "Why?"

"Just be careful, Severus. You're certain these Muggles aren't like..."

Aren't like Father, he thought angrily. "No," he said evenly. "No, the Evans family is nice enough, although Lily's older sister is rather unpleasant." *As if I'm not.*

If Eileen had anything else to say, she didn't elaborate. The fact that she had asked a couple of questions and referred to her own husband in a negative manner were promising to Severus. She wasn't completely gone. Perhaps it wasn't too late.

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Severus found that his days were much improved ever since his talk with Lily. He ate dinner with his mother every evening, and most of the time, his father was either out drinking or passed out on the couch. He could bear his father's muttered drunken threats if it meant seeing his mother smile or hearing her speak.

He spent far less time confined to his bedroom as well. He realized that he had been acting like a moody teenager feeling sorry for himself by doing so, and for now, his pride had relented. He wouldn't go as far as to say he was happy, but he was indeed content.

Severus was too jaded to be happy.

The days were long and lazy. On this particular day in late July, Severus and Lily were in their favorite spot among the trees and grass. Both were stretched out, lying on their backs, staring at the sky. A few clouds passed slowly high above, but the sky was otherwise a lovely shade of blue.

"Sev?" Lily asked.

"Mmm?" Severus replied, feeling his eyelids become heavy.

"I'm glad for this."

"This?"

"You know... to just be here... with you."

A small smile graced his lips. The warmth of the sun on his face, the sound of the leaves rustling in the wind, the feel of the grass tickling his arms... he could have died in this moment and almost forgotten about his past life.

Almost.

"My mother is talking again," he said.

When no reply came, Severus turned his head to see Lily beaming. "That's great, Sev," she said sincerely.

"It's a small step," he replied with a shrug. He didn't want to make a bigger deal of it than it was. He had to be realistic.

"So, what does this mean, exactly?" Lily ventured.

"It means she's talking to me; that's all," Severus responded. He almost asked, "What would you have it mean?", but he knew what she would say.

Lily, with all her glamorous ideas about people, would think Eileen would make a complete recovery, that she would be the mother Severus needed and wanted. Severus didn't want to hear those false hopes. There were no promises, no guarantees.

Lily was frowning a little now, and Severus wondered if he'd said something to upset her. "Look, Lily, I- I just want to take it one day at a time."

Lily nodded. She seemed to understand.

The silence returned, and Severus fell asleep.

Sometime later, he awoke, finding it was nearly dark. Lily had fallen asleep as well, so he gently stook her awake.

As they walked back toward the street, Lily was saying, "I can't believe we were out for that long."

"Yes, well, we were," Severus said, pointing out the obvious.

When they reached the point of going their separate ways, they exchanged their good nights. For a moment, Severus thought Lily had expected him to kiss her, but the moment passed, and it was too late. A little awkwardly, he repeated his good night and began heading home.

Within five minutes, Severus reached his home on Spinner's End. From the curb, he thought he could hear shouting coming from within the house. Knowing his parents were fighting, a part of him wanted to turn away, but he knew the right thing to do was to enter and protect his mother from his father's unjust wrath.

Sure enough, upon stepping through the front door, Severus witnessed his father standing over Eileen, his fists raised and ready to strike. Eileen was cowering in evident fear, his eyes wide with horror upon seeing Severus there.

"Go, Severus!" she shouted.

"No," Severus said firmly. "Enough of this."

He strode toward his father and drew his wand, aiming it directly at him.

Chapter Seven

"I thought I told you never to lay a hand on Mum again," hissed Severus, slowly, menacingly advancing on his father, his wand ready to do irreversible damage.

Tobias's eyes were large with shock, rage, and fear. Severus could see every vein, red against the stark white. "Y-you wouldn't dare," Tobias muttered. "She deserves it, lying witch that she is."

"I wouldn't dare, you say, Father?" Severus asked silkily, dangerously low. "You fail to comprehend what magic can do to you, you bastard. You have absolutely *no* idea what I'm capable of. Did you know, Father, that the other kids at school have accused me of knowing more Dark spells than anyone else in the school?"

Tobias held his hands out in front of him placatingly, shaking his head slowly. "N-no, that's a lie. You're just a boy. A wretched waste of a boy."

From the side, Severus saw his mother trying to intervene. Eileen was sobbing and begging pathetically with them. "Severus, please... Tobias, he's only a boy..."

Severus pointedly ignored her. As long as she stayed out of his way, he wouldn't have to magically bind her. "You've done enough damage around here, Father," he spat. "Here's your choice - either pack up your things and leave and *never* return, or suffer being on the receiving end of my fury. The choice is yours, Father. If I were you, I'd choose the first option."

Severus was imaging, with a twisted pleasure, using his own spell, Sectumsempra, to slice the man's genitals straight off... and that would just be the beginning. He knew he wasn't supposed to use magic underage, and even though his father knew this, Severus did love his mother, who was a witch, even though she hadn't done magic in years. Strictly speaking, if he did magic, it would be underage and breaking the International Statute for the Secrecy of Magic, but the Ministry didn't monitor houses with at least one magical parent. What the Ministry didn't know wouldn't hurt them... and more importantly,

wouldn't hurt Severus. He inwardly grinned evilly. It was all too convenient, after all.

When Tobias didn't reply immediately, Severus said, "I've been on my good behavior, Father, but that can be easily remedied. It's your choice. Now, choose."

Tobias had the audacity to laugh. "Do you think I'm to be fooled by your empty threats, boy? You can't-"

"Trust me, Father, you don't want to try my patience right now," Severus hissed, closing in on the man. "Now, stop your blubbering and tell me what your decision is!" he snarled.

Casting a glare of loathing from Eileen, who was still whimpering helplessly off to the side, to Severus, Tobias replied, "Fine, fine... I'll leave."

There was something about his father's voice that Severus didn't trust, so he said, "Very well. Now, go pack your things and get the hell out of here. I'll help you."

Tobias looked questioningly at his son, but by "helping," Severus meant following his father into his bedroom to ensure he actually did as he said he would. "Go," Severus commanded, keeping his wand out and directed at Tobias.

Tobias muttered a couple of obscenities under his voice and shuffled up the stairs to his room. "This isn't necessary, Severus," Tobias said, trying to reason with the younger man. "I promise-"

"Shut up," Severus snapped. "You've lost the right to make empty promises a long time ago. You have five minutes, and then I want you through the front door."

Tobias stumbled to the closet and pulled out a suitcase and began to haphazardly throw clothing into it. All the while, he kept muttering swear words and would occasionally beg his son again. "Please, Severus," he implored, desperately using his son's given name for the second time, "show some mercy... Where will I go?"

"I am showing you mercy," Severus ground out. "And it's not really my concern where you go. Go to one of those friends' houses you sometimes crash at. Your drinking mates will be happy to see you, no doubt. The lot of you can get pissed together as much as you want and only have each other to deal with."

Tobias was still fumbling around when five minutes were up. "Come on," Severus said. "Now."

"But- but-" Tobias started to protest.

Losing the shred of patience he had left, Severus crossed the room to where his father stood and pressed the tip of his wand into the man's back. "Go. Now."

Tobias half-drunkenly crossed the room and down the hall and stairs. Once they were standing at the front door, Severus opened it and said, "I trust you've packed some money?"

"Yes," Tobias replied. Just then, he dropped his suitcase and made to grab Severus's wand, but Severus was too fast for him. Being younger and having years of experience in combat were at his advantage.

"I'll snap your wand just like I did hers!" Tobias was raging.

Severus didn't take a moment to think. He magically blasted Tobias straight through the door, a shove so powerful, the man was in the street, several feet away, sprawled on the pavement. Severus then did likewise with the suitcase and slammed the door, bolting it with the locks and magically warding it. He no longer cared about using magic underage. In his mind, he was a grown wizard. His mother had suffered enough. Severus proceeded to ward all the windows and the back door.

Finally calm again, knowing Tobias couldn't get in no matter how hard he tried, Severus found his mother still sitting on the floor in the same place she had been earlier. She had stopped crying, but her knees were drawn up to her chest, with her arms around them, and she was rocking back and forth. It was a small, terrified position.

She flinched as Severus offered his hand to help her up. Anger at what his father had done and at himself for never helping her in his past life boiled inside Severus. Eileen turned to look up at her son's face and gasped with a choked sob, thinking he was about to harm her, for the anger was showing on his face.

"It's all right, Mum," he said roughly. "I'm not upset at you. Just... grab my hand. I promise- I'd never hurt you."

Eileen hesitated, but then reached for his hand. He pulled her up and instantly wrapped his arms protectively around her. "He's gone now, Mum. He's gone. He'll never hurt you again, I promise. You're safe now."

Eileen wept into her son's shirt. After a few minutes, he led her to the couch and gently forced her to sit down. He remained with her until she had calmed.

"Severus, you... you used magic," she croaked, her voice afraid.

"Yes," he said evenly. "I had no choice, Mum."

"But you're only sixteen."

"Yes, but the Ministry won't know who performed the magic. You're a witch, Mum. Surely you haven't forgotten that."

Eileen frowned at the floor. "But... I haven't done magic in years."

"That doesn't matter. They know you live here, too. We'll be all right now. Maybe we can go to Diagon Alley and get you a new wand soon," Severus suggested, trying to lighten the mood a little.

But Eileen didn't seem responsive to this. She withdrew into herself again. Sighing sadly, Severus led her to bed and returned to his own room after that. As he reflected on what had just happened, he realized with shame and defeat that maybe it really was too late for his mother. Had Tobias inflicted too much damage on her already that it couldn't be undone? Was Eileen afraid of magic now?

Severus recalled an earlier conversation he'd had with his mother when she had said she loved her husband. He worried she wouldn't see reason as easily as he hoped.

"What's he done to you, Mother?" Severus asked, staring at the ceiling. "What's he done?"

Like in times past whenever he was feeling particularly forlorn and detached from the world, Severus brought out his wand and zapped flies.

Chapter Eight

The next morning, Severus awoke early, hoping to start breakfast. He went down to the kitchen, finding Eileen nowhere in sight. She was most likely still sleeping, then.

He had never really taken care of another human being before, and as he set about preparing breakfast, he felt like the parent. He wondered again what could have been in his other life had he bothered to help his mother, but as Severus set the table, he knew he couldn't have expected his former sixteen-year-old self to act in the same manner as he was now. He was an adult wizard in his mind, and to him, that changed everything.

He looked out the window facing the street for signs of his father, but didn't see the man. Either Tobias was sleeping on a park bench somewhere or had gone to the home of one of his mates. Withdrawing from the window, Severus decided he wouldn't waste another minute thinking about the awful man. The only thing that mattered regarding Tobias was that he was kept away.

When the clock struck eight, Severus decided it was time to get his mother. He rapped on the door to her bedroom, and when no reply came, he gingerly turned the handle. Eileen was awake, sitting up in bed, staring straight ahead.

"Good morning, Mum," he greeted her, trying to start conversation.

Eileen didn't respond. Severus walked to the bedside and reached for her hand. She withdrew it and released a small whimper. She recoiled from her son yet again when he tried to go for her arm.

"Where's Tobias?" she asked.

Oh, great, Severus thought sardonically. He tried to keep his patience when dealing with her. After all, he couldn't blame his mother for the way she was acting.

Choosing not to answer that loaded question, Severus stated levelly, "Breakfast is waiting for you, Mum. Come downstairs and eat."

Eileen stared at Severus for a couple of minutes like he had just spoken a foreign language, but understanding finally registered in her eyes, and she relented, allowing herself to be issued out the room and to the kitchen.

Breakfast was a quiet affair. Severus figured it best not to mention Tobias, for he feared what reaction it might cause in his mother. After she had finished eating, he suggested she take a bath. She had managed that fine on her own numerous times in the past, so he wasn't going to help her if he didn't have to. He knew it was ridiculous, but a part of him was embarrassed at the thought of seeing his mother naked, even if it was out of necessity.

When Eileen left to have her bath, Severus cleaned up, wondering how he could possibly return to Hogwarts knowing his mother would be alone. He knew the Wizarding world was severely lacking in terms of healthcare compared to the Muggle world. If he took her to St. Mungo's, she would be committed and probably have to spend the rest of her life there. Her quality of life would suffer. She would be nothing more than a prisoner, and Severus wasn't about to do that to her. She deserved better.

He sighed. He was sixteen! What could he possibly do? What authority did he have? Even if he took her to a Muggle institution to get help, he would have no say. Even his drunken father would probably have more rights. He was Eileen's husband, after all.

Severus shook his head. His only hope was to improve his mother's condition in the next month and hope for the best. He wondered if explaining the circumstances to Dumbledore would do any good. Could he at least return home on the weekends to check on her once school started? He would figure out something, but for now, he would do what he could.

Later that day, Severus grew restless. It was another beautiful day outside, and he had spent it inside, concerning himself over his mother. It hadn't even been one day, and he was already growing weary of the task of caring for her. He felt guilty just leaving her there and going out, but as he observed her, he realized she wasn't incapable of functioning on her own. Was he being overbearing?

Eileen was in the sitting room reading a book near the fireplace when Severus entered.

"Will you be okay, Mum, if I go visit Lily for a little while?"

Eileen looked up from the book and, surprisingly, gave her son a smile. "Of course, Severus," she said pleasantly. "Why wouldn't I be?"

That smile was an odd spectacle. It both warmed his heart, for he hadn't seen her smile like that in years, and unnerved him, for he wondered if she was in her right mind.

"You're sure?" he asked, arching an eyebrow.

The smile was gone, but she had the wherewithal to look sensible. "Yes, Severus," Eileen said pointedly, much in the same tone Severus often used when his patience was dwindling.

Severus nodded and smirked to himself. That certainly sounded more like the mother he used to know.

He left Spinner's End and went to "their spot" near the playground. Lily wasn't there, but that was fine. Severus was glad to just be outside. He idly watched children play on the swings and slides and whatnot, recalling when Lily and he were young enough to do those things. The saying that those memories felt like they were from another lifetime was more than true for Severus. Memories of his childhood felt incredibly distant.

After some time, Lily joined him.

"I was here earlier," she said, "but didn't see you. I began to wonder if you'd show."

Severus shrugged and made a noncommittal noise. "I would have come if I could," he said.

"Oh?"

"It's..." Severus trailed off, knowing he needed to tell Lily the truth about last night, but feeling ashamed of his broken family, "...my family." The leaf he had been twirling in his fingers moments ago was now being ripped apart brutally by his deft hands. "You know they always fought. You know about my father's *problem*," he sneered.

Lily simply nodded, giving him the chance to continue.

"I'd finally had enough, I guess. He's gone now, Lily. I kicked him out of the house... literally."

Lily understood his meaning. "Sev, you- you used magic?"

"Yes," he sighed impatiently. "What was I supposed to do, Lily?"

"I guess you're right, but you're sure you won't get in trouble?"

"Remember, my mum is a witch. It's different than your house."

"Right," she murmured.

"The point is... my mother isn't right anymore. I was trying to help her all day. I don't think she can be left alone for long... or that she should be, at any rate," Severus explained, purposefully keeping his voice even. He didn't want to let his emotions invade.

"Oh, Sev," Lily said in a choked voice. "That's awful. I'm so sorry..."

"Don't be," he said, a little too harshly. When he saw the hurt look on her face, he softened some. "I mean, it's not your fault. What do you have to be sorry for?"

"I meant I was sorry for the whole situation... that you and your mum have to go through it, is all," Lily replied sincerely. "Sev, you deserve better; you both do."

He shrugged. "It's not a matter of deserving anything, Lily. I don't think life works that way."

"No," she sighed sadly, "I suppose you're right."

Severus heard the defeated tone in her words and felt badly for bringing her down. She was the sunshine in his dark world, and he didn't want to burn her out. He tentatively reached for her hand with his and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

"I'm not always right," he said softly as their eyes met.

Chapter Nine

Severus was spending much less time confined to his room now that he had taken on the responsibility of caring for his mother. The task had become a full time job for him, and he had little time to devote to reading or leaving the house to meet Lily in the park. Thankfully, there had been no sign of Tobias. August came, and the days continued to be warm and gorgeous.

As much as he wanted to see Lily, he knew he couldn't leave his mother for more than a couple of hours unattended, and as the first of September drew ever closer, he worried what he would do once school started. A part of him didn't even want to go back to Hogwarts. He imagined certain classes being especially dull, since he knew far more than the curriculum covered. He would have to be confronted with the Marauders and his supposed Slytherin friends, and that was not something he wanted to deal with.

Worse than any of those things, however, was the prospect of simply being reminded. Being at Hogwarts brought back too many memories from his past life, and many of them hadn't been good. The place he had once called home was no longer his home. He didn't want to look into Dumbledore's blue eyes, knowing this was the man he had killed in another lifetime. He didn't want to walk the halls he had spent night after night patrolling, more out of the inability to sleep than anything. He didn't care to see professors who had known and taught him since he was eleven, the same professors who had forcefully driven him out of Hogwarts when he had been headmaster, a job he had certainly never wanted. He hated teaching, so Hogwarts was, all in all, a huge reminder of too many negative memories: from the more trivial of simply having no patience to try to educate students who didn't want to learn to the worst and darkest, seeing Dumbledore's limp body falling from the Astronomy Tower.

Severus forced himself to dwell no longer on Hogwarts. He wasn't there yet, and having lived this new life for a few weeks now, he was determined to take it one day at a time. If he allowed himself to be consumed by events past and what could happen if he wasn't careful, he would drive himself mad, and then what good would he be to his mother?

The past few times he'd met with Lily outside, she had offered to visit him. It had taken Severus several days to agree to this. While she knew about his situation at home, he wasn't sure how his mother would take to having a visitor, and he wasn't completely comfortable with Lily even knowing what she did about his home and family. Telling her was one thing, but actually showing her was another.

And so, it was now with growing trepidation that he waited for her to ring the bell. She had said she would be over at two o'clock, and it was now five minutes till two. Severus had done his best to make the rundown house presentable, and Eileen, groomed and dressed decently, was seated in her usual spot in the sitting room reading.

Everything will be fine, he told himself for probably the tenth time in the past half an hour. *What do you have to be nervous about? You ought to know better. It's Lily, for heaven's sake!*

Severus checked on his mother and then did a quick walk-through of the first floor. He glanced at the clock again and found it was now only two minutes until the hour. Just then, the doorbell rang.

He went to the door and opened it, and sure enough, Lily was standing there, smiling prettily at him.

"Hello, Sev," she greeted him.

"Hi, Lily," he returned. "Er, come in," he added awkwardly a couple of seconds later.

He stepped aside, allowing Lily to enter, and then closed the door. Lily had never seen inside Spinner's End in all the years she had known him. She had never asked about coming over in the past, as she knew it was almost a taboo topic. Now, however, she was standing in his home, taking it all in. She continued to smile and stated that she thought it cozy.

Severus snorted. He knew she was simply being polite. While another house similar in size for its smallness might be called cozy, that other house would also be inviting to guests, and Spinner's End most certainly was not welcoming. The shabbiness of the furniture, the threadbare rugs, the grimy light fixtures, the worn surfaces of the

kitchen table and counters, and the dark colors did not speak of being cozy.

"Yes, well, it's not much," Severus said with a shrug, "but I suppose it's home."

Lily nodded, gazing up the stairs. Severus wondered if she wanted to go up there and see his bedroom, and he wasn't about to entertain that thought. He instead gestured toward the sitting room, saying, "My mother's in here if you want to properly meet her."

"That would be nice," Lily said pleasantly, following him in that direction.

While Eileen had made small improvements without Tobias around, she was still wont to sudden outbursts of demanding where her husband was or how Severus could have been so cruel as to have kicked him out. She still passed much of the time withdrawn into herself, staring off into space, murmuring incoherently to herself.

"Mum," Severus prodded, "I'd like you to meet someone."

Eileen kept the book perched on her lap and was looking down at it, her hair veiling most of her face. Severus watched her closely and noticed her eyes weren't moving, so she wasn't even reading.

"Sometimes she's like this," Severus whispered to Lily. "She might not even be responsive. It's kind of a matter of luck..."

Lily nodded. "That's all right, Sev," she replied. "I understand."

Severus gave her a sideways glance. A part of him was tempted to retort, "Do you really understand?" He held back, though, knowing it would be rude, and Lily was trying her best to be understanding. What did she know of an abusive father and a mother who was mentally unstable? She had two nurturing, loving parents.

"Mum," Severus repeated. "This is Lily Evans. You've seen her from a distance with me. She's the girl I've told you about."

Eileen's dark eyes slowly looked up and into Lily's face. Eileen didn't say anything, but Severus figured she was at least recognizing that Lily was there.

"Today is one of her bad days," Severus explained in a hushed voice to Lily. He felt bad talking about his mother when she was seated right there, but if Eileen's lack of speech was anything to go by, she wasn't really mentally all there at the moment, although Severus could never be sure how aware his mother actually was. Just because she didn't respond with words didn't mean she wasn't listening and comprehending what was going on around her.

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Snape," Lily said politely.

Eileen reacted to Lily's well-meaning words by dropping her book and withdrawing back into the chair, cringing and whimpering in fright. Lily, feeling she had done something wrong, also jumped. Eileen obviously hadn't been expecting Lily to talk. Her voice was unfamiliar to Eileen.

"I'm sorry; I'm sorry!" Lily exclaimed, taking several steps back. She looked from Eileen to Severus apologetically. "Did I do something I shouldn't have?"

Eileen was still cowering in her seat. Severus pointedly refrained from answering Lily's question because his attention was solely on his mother. It took several minutes for him to calm Eileen down, and then he coaxed her into standing and began to lead her away.

"I'll be back in a minute," he told Lily softly, wondering if he'd just made a huge mistake by bringing Lily here.

Lily anxiously waited downstairs for Severus to return. Ten minutes later, he descended the stairs and joined her in the sitting room.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "I didn't mean-"

"I know," Severus interjected, trying not to sound too upset. "It's not your fault. I didn't know how she would respond. If it's anyone's fault, it's mine."

He sighed heavily and dropped onto the couch, leaning on his knees with his elbows. He buried his face in his hands and rubbed tiredly at his eyes.

Lily sat next to him and carefully placed a hand on his back. "You're exhausted," she observed, sounding concerned.

Severus removed his face from his hands and looked at Lily. "Yes," he breathed. "I just don't know what more I can do for her. I wish she'd been in a good mood."

"You're putting too much on yourself," Lily said gently. "You've been spending every day helping her, and that's great, Sev. That's really great, but... what are you going to do when school starts?"

He frowned. "I've thought about that a lot. I don't know. Maybe I could talk to Dumbledore about keeping an eye on her... maybe get permission to Floo in every night to check on her and come home on the weekends. I don't know, Lily."

"That's possible," she conceded, "but what about your father? Aren't you worried he might come back?"

"Of course I am," Severus retorted before he could stop himself. "That bastard will stay away if he knows what's good for him, but I know I haven't seen the last of him."

Lily was trying to find something comforting and reassuring to say, but no words came. Finally, she said, "You shouldn't have to deal with all this, Sev. You're only sixteen."

"No, I'm-" Severus started to say, but caught himself before he gave away anything. He had almost said his true age, but Lily would have thought him mad. "No, I shouldn't have to," he amended. "But we're back to where we started. What to do?"

x x x x x

The next couple of weeks passed quickly. Lily had returned the following day to Spinner's End, and she was greeted by a much calmer Eileen. Lily and Severus cooked dinner together and took

turns reading to Eileen. The next several days that followed were passed in much the same manner. Severus had been right - Lily had, regrettably, visited on a "bad day" for Eileen the first time.

As the start of term approached, though, the niggling feeling of what to do about his mother grew inside Severus. He still firmly held to his decision that he wouldn't take her to St. Mungo's. There was the option of Muggle care, but being underage, he didn't have the power to admit his mother anywhere.

It was Lily who came up with the suggestion that made Severus think.

"What if your mum felt she needed the care and chose to admit herself?" she asked.

Author's Note: Thank you again for all the reviews! I'm just so touched by your readership:) I do try to answer all reviews I receive.

Just so you know, I will be gone over Labor Day weekend, and while there will definitely be an update tomorrow evening, I can't guarantee one for Friday before I leave in the afternoon. That said, there won't be any updates after tomorrow's until at least Monday evening, maybe Tuesday. I'm sorry!

Chapter Ten

Lily's suggestion seemed unrealistic at first. How could Severus convince Eileen that she needed professional care when she wasn't even able to function properly on her own? The more he thought about it, though, the more he realized it was the best option they had.

He considered Lily's words for several minutes before speaking. "And assuming we can get her admitted somewhere, there's still the problem of getting there. We can't very well travel by Apparating, broom, or the Floo Network, Lily."

Lily thought, then said, "My parents could drive us."

Like Lily's previous suggestion, it was valid and reasonable, but Severus was hard-pressed to concede. "Well... yes," he said with much hesitation, "but I don't know how much I want others to know about my mother's condition."

If Lily could appreciate the difficulty Severus had in simply telling her and introducing her to his mother, then she would understand how much more challenging it would be for him to tell her parents. Next thing he knew, Mr. and Mrs. Evans would be wanting to visit Eileen.

Lily nodded, gazing in defeat at the cup of tea clutched between her hands. They were sitting at the kitchen table during their discussion, with Eileen in the other room. She sighed and looked into Severus's eyes.

"I can't pretend to know what it must feel like to be going through what you are, Sev," Lily said gently, reaching across the table with her hand and taking his, "but... it would be for the best, wouldn't it? You want your mum to be taken care of properly when you're not around to do it, and this seems like the best option we have."

Severus stirred the tea with his free hand, digesting what she had said. He knew she was right, but that didn't make it any easier. He watched the tea as it swirled, contemplating his mother's future. He detested the idea of leaving her alone in this horrible house, a constant reminder of years of abuse at the hands of her husband, the place where she had lost her resolve to be a witch, and where she

had been slipping away from the world for so long. It would be cruel to leave her at Spinner's End, and so, swallowing his fears and anxieties, Severus finally forced himself to meet Lily's soft gaze.

Looking into her green eyes, he was reminded of why he had come to love her in the first place, even though he failed to oftentimes show it. She didn't judge like others. She was simply kind without expecting anything in return. That kind of selflessness was almost lost on Severus. Even in his years of spying for Dumbledore and protecting Harry Potter, he had done it for Lily.

At least at first he had.

A man couldn't go through what he had without changing, and although he would never admit it, he had chosen to fight against Voldemort because it was the right thing to do.

Just as helping his mother was the right thing to do.

And he did it because he wanted to. That was the difference of experience.

"All right," Severus finally agreed. "If you want to get your parents involved, you'll need to tell them first. They deserve fair warning before agreeing to something, and if they don't want to be involved, I'll understand."

Lily offered him a small smile, and after they finished their tea and Lily said she needed to return home for dinner, Severus led her to the door. Before parting ways, Lily embraced him, to which he, momentarily shocked by her display of affection, returned the gesture a few seconds later.

"You're a good person, Sev," Lily whispered into his ear, brushing his hair back. Her breath tickled, and he swallowed, unsure of himself to reply.

Lily released him from her embrace, and before leaving, she kissed him on the cheek, very close to the mouth. Rendered speechless, Severus watched Lily go through the door and close it behind her. He

stood there for a moment, his hand coming to touch the spot her lips had graced less than a minute ago.

And he smiled.

x x x x x

The following day, Lily came with good news - that her parents were willing to meet Eileen and hear her story from Severus. They had also graciously invited the Snapes to their home for dinner whenever it would be convenient for them. While that would save Severus the embarrassment of having them over his house, he didn't know how his mother would take to the news.

"Mum," Severus said, stepping into the sitting room, Lily close behind him, "I have something I'd like to share with you."

Eileen closed the book she had been reading and gave them her attention. Today was obviously one of her better days.

"How would you like to meet Lily's parents? They've invited us over for dinner." As he spoke, he kept his voice even, as to not add to his mother's potential anxiety upon receiving the information.

"Lily's parents?" Eileen asked, puzzled. "And why would I want to meet them?"

Lily wasn't insulted by Eileen's tone. She knew Eileen had a fear of Muggles because of her experiences with Tobias, and that fear fed the dislike Eileen's parents had tried to teach her as a child. Eileen, having wanted to prove her parents wrong, married a Muggle and later regretted it, thinking Mum and Dad Prince had been right all along.

"Because," Severus hesitated, "because they want to meet you, Mum... and they want to help."

"And why would I need help?" Eileen questioned, sounding offended.

Now, Severus was beginning to wonder if today was really one of her better days. Her indignance could have been induced by the illness or

just a part of her naturally prickly personality. Wanting to kick himself for having no tact, Severus thought this had been a bad idea. He hadn't even tried to explain their plan of taking her to a psychiatric ward for help... or tried to convince her that she needed to admit she needed said help.

"Because," Severus sputtered, "you *need* help, Mum."

Eileen looked affronted. She stood and placed the book firmly on the table next to the chair. "I'm your mother, Severus, and I won't be told what to do by you. You're the child here, not me."

"Won't you listen to reason, Mum?" Severus demanded, trying in vain to convince her how wrong she was.

"Don't you use that tone with me, young man!" Eileen exclaimed, now clearly vexed. She made to head for the door, but Severus blocked her.

"It's for your own good, Mother," he said, his voice growing louder with every word. "Look at what you've become! You're a witch, Mother, a witch, and yet, you haven't done magic in years, and why is that, Mother? Because you've let Father rule you. He's not here to tell you how to live your life now, and it's time you started trying to reclaim some of your dignity!"

Lily was standing in the background, too shocked to speak. Severus was breathing fast and shallow. Eileen cowered away from her son, tears falling down her face, her hands over her head as if she was trying to protect herself from being struck.

"Stop it, Tobias!" she screamed, and then she collapsed to the floor, sobbing uncontrollably, a complete wreck.

Stunned and hurt, Severus stepped away from his mother. "I'm not-" he tried to say, his voice breaking. "Mum, I'd never-"

He suddenly felt hands gently pulling him away from the scene, and he noticed Lily was at his side, trying to calm him. "Come on, Sev," she whispered consolingly into his ear. "Just... leave her be for a minute."

Numbly, Severus nodded and allowed Lily to guide him to the couch, where he sat and buried his face in his hands. Lily sat there in silence, giving him as much time as he needed. In the corner, Eileen's sobs had stopped, and Lily wondered if the older woman had fallen asleep.

"I'm sorry you had to witness that," came his sullen voice.

"Sev-" Lily tried to say.

"No, Lily," he cut her off, looking up. "You really shouldn't have seen that. I'm sorry. Maybe it would be best if I just kept her here and dropped out of school to take care of her. Who was I kidding by thinking she could be taken to a *Muggle* institution for care? She doesn't like Muggles a whole lot, not after my father."

Severus didn't voice the worst of the whole episode - his mother calling him by his father's name. He hated himself for acting in any way that would have made her think he was his *darned, bloody father*.

"What can I do to help?" Lily's meek voice asked.

"For now," Severus sighed, "there's nothing you can do. Tell your parents... tell them thank you for their offer, but right now, it's just not feasible."

Lily wanted to say that it might be possible on another day, but she held back, knowing Severus wasn't in the mood for platitudes. Instead, she stayed there with him in the silence, hope just out of reach.

x x x x x

Much later that day, long after Lily had gone, Severus was going through the nightly routine of putting Eileen to bed. Eileen had been calm but unresponsive the rest of the day, but at least she was cooperating. He pulled the covers over her and was about to leave and turn off the lights when he felt his mother's hand grab hold of his wrist.

"Severus," Eileen murmured.

For a moment, Severus refused to look at her. As much as he cared about his mother, the pain from earlier was still too strong. He sighed and turned his head, never a coward to face the truth.

"I'm sorry for calling you by his name," Eileen whispered.

Severus's eyes searched eyes so much like his own, and he sighed again and sat on the edge of the bed. "I know you didn't mean it," he told her. "I'm sorry for scaring you, Mum."

"You make me proud, Severus," Eileen said, smiling slightly.

For the first time in years, his mother had spoken those words. He knew she was very much in control of herself in these moments, more than she had been in a long time. He blinked back tears. How had she known?

"Good night, Mum," Severus whispered as he stood. He turned out the lights and went to his own bedroom, a small glimmer of hope alive.

Chapter Eleven

Severus spent the next few days at home with his mother, and Lily only came to visit a couple of times, for ever since Eileen's outburst, Severus was wary of bringing anyone else into the house. As much as he wanted to help his mother, he was beginning to feel the weight of the burden of caring for her rest quite heavily on his shoulders. The beginning of the new school year was fast approaching, and Severus still wasn't sure what he would do about Eileen.

One mid-August afternoon, Severus was taking a walk through the neighborhood, needing a break from his mother. She was sleeping soundly, and he had warded the house to ensure no one would get in and she wouldn't try to get out. He hated having to resort to locking her up like this, but it was for her own good as much as his.

Eileen hadn't had another episode like the one the day she had called Severus by his father's name. She had moments of lucidity, but she didn't seem to be making much progress overall, which was disheartening to Severus. He felt he was trying as much as he could to help her, and every time she would lapse into one of her listless moods, he would wonder if she would ever be well again. His suggestion a few weeks ago of getting a wand for her seemed ludicrous now. How could Eileen ever be capable of handling a wand again, let alone trusted with one?

As Severus rounded the corner, he noticed a public bus pulling up to a stop to pick up some people. He had seen the bus several times before and not spared it a second thought, but this time, he cursed himself for being so stupid. Here, Lily and he had been looking for a way to transport his mother to a facility, and there was public transportation less than five blocks away!

And Lily tells you you're brilliant, Severus inwardly scoffed.

The flame was ignited inside him. They had a way to get Eileen to a mental ward! Now, there was the problem of convincing her, and that was something Severus had been trying to talk with her about every day since he had first mentioned it. More often than not, Eileen wouldn't respond, whether because she didn't understand or because she chose not to.

Severus returned home and did something he rarely did: He used the phone to call Lily.

Of course, Petunia had to be the one to answer the phone. When Petunia found out it was Severus on the other end, she nearly hung up, but he resorted to pathetically begging her not to, saying it was important. He could almost see her roll her eyes as she relented and shouted for Lily.

Within a minute, Lily's lovely voice came over the line. "Severus?"

"Yes, Lily, it's me."

"Why are you calling me? I mean, you never use the phone. Is everything okay?"

Hearing the concern in her voice, he stated hastily, "No, no, everything's fine. I just... really needed to tell you something. Lily, I think I know how we can take Mum somewhere for help."

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Later that day, Severus was seated across the table in the kitchen from Eileen. They had just finished dinner, and Eileen had been more talkative than usual. Taking this as a good sign, Severus posed the question.

"Mum, would you consider letting us take you somewhere to... to get help for your, er, condition? Before you say anything, please at least think about it. You know something's not right, Mum. Father has ruined you. I've asked you this over and over again, but please... Mum, it's important to me." He added the last part, playing the guilt card, something he hadn't yet tried.

Eileen frowned. "Severus... I know I'm not happy, but Tobias is gone now. Can't you just let me be? Why would I need to go somewhere other than here? I'm not mental, Severus."

"I'm not saying you are, Mum," Severus said, trying to keep his voice level, knowing she was unbalanced and depressed, but not wishing to tell her. Telling her she was crazy would not help matters any. "I

just... School is going to be starting soon, and I won't be around to help you. I've been cooking for you and making sure you go to bed for weeks now, Mum. I can't just leave you alone and be left wondering if you're taking care of yourself. It wouldn't hurt to see someone who is a professional about these matters and see what they have to say."

Eileen was silent. She seemed to be considering her reply. After a long while, she murmured, her shoulders drooping, "I- I know you're right, Severus. It's just that... admitting it is hard." She paused, then nodded slowly. "All right."

Severus smiled in relief and left his seat to embrace his mother.

"You realize I'm only doing this for you," said Eileen's sarcastic voice into his hair.

"I know, Mum; I know."

And that was enough.

x x x x x

Three days later, the arrangements made, Severus stepped onto the public bus with Lily, who was there for support, and his mother. Eileen glanced around erratically, uneasy by the other passengers. She hadn't been in public since she had come to pick Severus up at the train station, but that was a trip she was familiar with well enough to manage. Severus kept a fast grip on her arm as he led her to a seat.

"These Muggles are a strange, scary lot," Eileen muttered, her eyes sweeping left and right. "Why are they all looking at me?"

Severus glared at the man who was sitting across the aisle from them and said to his mother, "Just be quiet and relax, Mum. We'll be there soon."

Lily sat there quietly, a calming presence for Severus as he imagined what the other passengers must be thinking about his mother. It

wouldn't be a lie if he told them she was crazy. Surely that was what they thought as the odd woman used words like "Muggle."

They spent the next half hour on the bus until arriving at their destination: St. Katherine's Mental Facility. The building was old and small, built with weathered brick. Trees surrounded the front walk as they made their way toward the front door. Severus thought it looked welcoming enough, and upon entering, the lobby area was also inviting. Nothing about the place spoke of imprisonment.

The woman behind the counter smiled at the group and asked, "May I help you?"

"Yes," Severus said. "We have an appointment with Dr. Lukvar."

"Ah," the woman said. "I'll let him know you're here."

They took seats in the lobby and waited. Eileen murmured to herself about not liking the place, about wanting to leave. Severus hoped she would be lucid enough to admit to wanting to be housed and cared for here. If she continued to be the muttering, frightened woman she was right now, the doctor would turn them away, for two sixteen-year-olds had no say in whether someone could be admitted or not.

"Sev," Lily whispered, trying to calm his nerves. "It'll be okay." She reached for his hand.

He nodded, trying to believe her.

A few minutes later, they were invited to the doctor's office. Doctor Lukvar was foreign and spoke with a thick accent, but his English was good. He had dark brown hair that was thinning and glasses that were so thick, Severus wondered how his nose held them without breaking off.

"Please, be seated," he cordially told them. They did so, and he proceeded to ask, "So, what has brought you here today?"

Eileen didn't answer. Severus, feeling the need to speak on her behalf, said, "My mother. She is quite unwell, sir."

By the way Severus had spoken, the doctor thought him older than sixteen. "I see, and are you wishing to admit her at St. Katherine's for care, Mr. Snape?"

"Yes," Severus replied automatically, for that was what he wanted.

Dr. Lukvar shuffled through some papers, examining them with his hugely magnified eyes. Severus was reminded of Sybill Trelawney.

"It says here you are Eileen Prince Snape's only son and that you were born on January 9, 1960. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Severus said tersely, knowing where this was going.

"That would make you all of sixteen years old, young man, not old enough to claim responsibility for another. Where is her husband?"

"My father," Severus spat, "was in no condition to care for her. He's the reason she's like this! He was a raging alcoholic who abused her for years, and now he's finally gone... probably living on the streets."

Shocked by Severus's small tirade, he adjusted his glasses and cleared his throat. "Yes, well, be that as it may... I am sorry, Mr. Snape, but unless Eileen Snape wishes to admit herself, we cannot proceed."

Just then, Eileen said softly, "I know I need help."

Severus sighed in relief. Eileen was watching the others intently, her eyes completely alert and focused. She spoke again. "My son has to return to school soon... He won't be around. This is... the best option."

Dr. Lukvar regarded Eileen skeptically and then said, "Very well, but I will need to ask you a series of questions to further assess your condition. Are you willing to do that, Mrs. Snape?"

Eileen didn't respond at first, and Severus sat there on the edge of his seat, anxious with worry. Lily reached for his hand again, saying nothing, but steadying him. Finally, Eileen nodded.

The questions began, and Severus listened as his mother answered to the best of her ability. She was well enough to speak coherently and thoroughly. After a long time, the doctor said they were finished.

"I will review your history and be in contact with you shortly, Mrs. Snape," he explained. "I cannot make any promises just yet, but I have a feeling we can find a place for you here at St. Katherine's."

He shook their hands, and as they exited, Severus felt an enormous burden lifted from his shoulders. He kept one arm locked with Eileen's arm and the hand on the opposite arm holding tightly onto Lily's hand.

"Thank you," he breathed to Lily.

Author's Note: Thank you for being patient with me! I'm sorry for not updating yesterday as promised, but I was absolutely exhausted from the weekend. I don't think this chapter was my best, but I needed to get it written, and I'm quite tired today.

St. Katherine's Mental Facility is fictional. If there really is a place with this name, it's purely coincidental.

I figured since Severus would be using a Muggle mental facility for his mother, it would make sense that he wouldn't be against using other Muggle things, like the phone or the bus.

Dr. Lukvar's name came from a bastardization of "Dr. Lookfar" from Snapecast. If you've never listened to Snapecast, you must check it out at [snapecast\(dot\)com](http://snapecast(dot)com)! They even answered my email message to them in their owl post segment on the Sept. 1 episode:)

Several people have suggested that Severus sit his N.E.W.T.s early, but part of the point of him reliving his life is to be with Lily, and Lily would still be at Hogwarts for two more years. Plus, just because he is an adult doesn't mean he would sufficiently pass them. If you've been out of school for a number of years, you'll understand what I mean when I say that you can't retain everything you learned. I don't imagine Severus was excellent at every subject, so he would probably fail some of them without schooling again.

Chapter Twelve

Two days later, Dr. Lukvar called and said that Eileen was accepted. In less than a week, Severus would help her move in to St. Katherine's. He thought it odd that he would have the house to himself for a few days before going back to Hogwarts. Thankfully, the Wizarding world had its ways of covering itself in the Muggle world to ensure no questions of suspicion would be raised. Severus would appear to be at a Muggle boarding school the next several months, and records of his mother's birth and history existed in the Muggle world as if she were a part of it. While Spinner's End was located in a Muggle neighborhood, Severus had already placed enough wards around the area to keep Muggles away, especially ones who were suspicious about an underage young man living alone there. And Tobias, of course.

For some unknown and strange reason, Muggles would have the toughest job trying to locate the exact spot of the Snape house, or they would conveniently forget why they had come there in the first place. Severus smirked at his own ingeniousness.

When the time came for Eileen to be admitted, the trip was a mixed bag for Severus. While he was relieved and glad his mother would be cared for in his absence, he was concerned as well. What if she did wandless magic? He knew she hadn't done so in years, and it seemed unlikely, but still, there was the possibility. Also, she would no doubt lapse into murmuring about magic when she wasn't lucid. Of course, that would be easily dismissed as a part of her condition, but Severus hoped she received the proper care she so desperately needed. He was entrusting his mother's well-being to a bunch of strangers, and letting go of control was not something he did readily.

Sadness also was in the mix. As they rode together on the bus in silence, Eileen seeming to have submitted to the reality of the situation, Severus held fast to her slightly trembling hand, trying to keep his own from shaking.

Everything will be okay, he kept repeating in his head like a mantra.

When they arrived, Severus stepped off the bus with Eileen at his side. Lily hadn't come with him this time. He said he needed to do this

alone. Severus worried he might break down or lose it after departing from his mother, and he didn't want Lily to see that vulnerability. As much as he had opened up to her, he was still a very closed person, and it would take time before he would feel comfortable enough to completely bear his soul to Lily.

Severus greeted the lady in the reception room, and within minutes, Dr. Lukvar came and received them. He led the pair of them to what would be Eileen's room. As Severus surveyed the small room, he found it comfortable and simple. It was painted a light yellow, a calming color. If not for the bars on the window, it could have been just another bedroom in any home. As Severus's eyes rested on those bars, he was reminded that as benign as the place appeared, it was still a prison. He swallowed down the lump in his throat, feeling guilty for locking his mother up like this.

"I assure you, Mr. Snape," the doctor was saying, noticing the concern on the young man's face, "that your mother will be taken care of quite well. You will be living with your grandparents for the next week before starting school as we discussed, correct?"

Severus nodded. The lie was easily fabricated. Eileen's parents were dead, but even when they had been alive, there had been no contact between Eileen and them. They had basically disowned their only child when she married a Muggle, but with the use of a little magic, Severus had made it look like he would be in their care when he wasn't at school. What the Muggle doctor didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Eileen was standing near the doorway, her expression without emotion. Dr. Lukvar was going on about the treatment she would be receiving, but neither Severus nor Eileen was listening. Severus went to his mother and took her hand, squeezing it gently. She blinked and met his gaze, and as the doctor stopped talking, she said, "I guess this is goodbye for now."

"Yes, Mum," Severus said softly, "but I'll see you soon. You'll be fine. They'll... take good care of you." As he spoke these last words, he knew he was trying to convince himself more than her.

Unable to say anything more, Severus hugged her one last time and left without another word. He left the facility as quickly as possible, refusing to look back. He knew if he spared one glance over his shoulder, he would change his mind about the whole arrangement. It was with great difficulty and a heavy heart that Severus got on the bus and returned to Spinner's End.

He entered the empty house he couldn't really call home and tried to remind himself that in a few days he would be at Hogwarts. He would be back at the one place he had ever called home.

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"How are you holding up, Sev?" Lily asked the following day as she sat amongst the copse of trees near the playground.

Severus sighed. "All right, I guess," he lied.

Lily frowned and said gently, "It's all right to be upset. I couldn't imagine what you must be feeling right now."

"Guilty, sad, relieved, and a bit angry, I suppose," Severus admitted.

Feeling he didn't want to talk about the subject any longer, Lily asked, "Are you going to Diagon Alley to get new supplies? I'm going with my parents tomorrow. You're welcome to join us. They don't know about... your mum being gone."

Severus considered for a moment. "No," he finally said, "but thanks. I have my mum's old textbooks, and my robes should still fit. Besides, I don't have access to that much money. My mum's parents' money went into her account after they died, although they only left it to her because they had no other children, but I don't want to touch it." Severus wanted nothing to do with the Prince money, for they had mistreated their daughter horribly.

"Are you sure?" Lily pressed. "It might be good for you to get out."

"No," Severus insisted. "Really, Lily... I don't want to go to Diagon Alley."

He liked spending time with her, but lately, even Lily's company didn't seem satisfactory for him. Ever since sending his mother to St. Katherine's, an unbidden loneliness had settled in his heart and refused to leave. Severus tried to convince himself that he would feel better when he was back at Hogwarts, for at least he would be kept occupied with classes and homework.

Lily didn't bother him further about the issue. She knew he had been through a lot this summer and figured he would adjust to the changes in time. For now, Lily would stay with him, and for that, Severus was grateful.

In the past two months, Severus's new life had been a rollercoaster of emotions and experiences. He had tested the waters and dove in. As rough as the past several weeks had been, Severus could look at his forearm and be reminded that it was free of the Dark Mark and that his other arm was around the woman he loved.

Author's Note: I know it's horribly short, and I'm sorry:(I'm still recovering from the weekend, and I'm really tired, but I wanted to give you something, even if it wasn't much. I imagine wizards have ways of devising birth records and the like in the Muggle world, and the wards Severus has placed around his home are somewhat like the ones mentioned being around other magical areas to deter Muggles. I hope it's satisfactory!

Chapter Thirteen

Severus glanced over his shoulder one last time, taking in Spinner's End. He was leaving his house for the new school year ahead. He turned the corner, and the house was gone from view. He didn't look back. No regrets. That was what he had to tell himself. His mother was safe at St. Katherine's, and his father was God knew where.

In a few short hours, Lily and he would be boarding the Hogwarts Express. He was going with the Evanses to the train station, so he made his way to their home. Within ten minutes, he was outside the front door. He rang the bell, hoping Petunia wouldn't answer. Thankfully, Lily had been expecting him and came to the door almost immediately.

She grinned widely upon seeing Severus and flung her arms around his neck, nearly throwing him off balance. He was holding his baggage in both hands, so he couldn't return the hug.

Smiling slightly, Severus said, "Don't knock me over, Lily."

She released her grip on him and said, "Here, let me take one of those." She motioned toward the bags.

"No need," he replied, setting them down on the porch for the time being. "You'll have your stuff to carry, and your parents will be out soon, right?"

Nodding, Lily stepped outside, closing the door behind her. "You're lucky. Petunia won't be going with us. She started at the university a few days ago."

"That's good... I mean, that she won't be going with us," Severus quipped.

Lily playfully smacked his arm, saying, "Oh, Sev, you're awful. Aren't you happy for my sister, going off to university and all?"

"Not really," he said dryly.

Lily was about to reply, but the front door opened, and Mr. and Mrs. Evans stepped through, Lily's bags in tow.

"Would you care to help us here, Lily?" asked her mother. Looking up, she noticed Severus, and said, "Oh, good morning, Severus."

Mr. Evans smiled kindly at Severus and wished him a good morning as well. Lily helped her parents with her baggage, and together, everyone made their way to the car.

"Good morning, Mr. Evans, Mrs. Evans," Severus returned with a nod to each of them as they loaded everything into the trunk.

Once the bags were secure, the trunk was closed, and everyone got into the car. Severus and Lily sat in the back seat. Riding in a Muggle vehicle was a strange phenomenon for Severus. Even though he had ridden on the bus not long ago, that was a different feeling than a small car. As the car pulled out of the driveway and onto the street, Severus mused how different cars looked in this decade from the decade he had left. At least things in the magical world didn't change too much.

It was still very early when they left, as the drive to London would be quite long. The lengthy trip gave Severus plenty of time to talk quietly with Lily, but he didn't talk too much since her parents were right there. The Evanses were nice enough people, but Severus didn't feel comfortable divulging a lot of information about himself in front of them... or more like literally behind them in the car. He wanted badly to cuddle with Lily, but there was no way he was going to do that with her parents watching. So, he was resigned to sharing in mindless prattle with Lily's parents and looking out the window and occasionally drifting to sleep when his eyelids grew too heavy.

Finally, at 10:45, they arrived. Hurrying out of the car and to the inside of the train station, Lily bade her parents farewell. Severus half-heartedly said goodbye to them and allowed Mrs. Evans to give him a quick, one-armed hug. Together, Severus and Lily stepped through the magical barrier onto Platform Nine and Three-Quarters, leaving Lily's parents behind in the Muggle world. They wasted no time in boarding the train and finding an empty compartment.

Flopping onto the seat, Severus heaved a sigh of relief. They hadn't had very much time, and not a moment after his backside reached contact with the seat did the train start moving.

"I hope no one else joins us," he stated sullenly, glaring at some other students as they walked past.

Lily, who was sitting across from him, giggled. "Always the welcoming type, aren't you, Sev?"

"Only for you," he said seriously. He purposefully stretched himself out on the seat, hoping no one would ask to sit there. "Do the same," he told Lily.

"I'm not putting my feet up on the seat," Lily protested. "Really, Sev, what if a first year who has nowhere else to sit asks to join us?"

Severus grimaced. "Well, I *suppose* that might be permissible, but you're sitting next to me if that happens. If you at least put one of your bags on the seat next to you, it'll look like there's no room in our compartment."

Lily resisted the urge to roll her eyes and sighed. "Oh, fine," she gave in, doing as Severus had asked.

Severus thought she seemed a little annoyed at his suggestion. "What's wrong?" he demanded, growing irritated. "Do you really not care if someone else joins us? If Potter and Black come in here?"

"Of course I care," Lily replied, frowning. "I just... didn't want to be rude. It's not in my nature."

Snorting, Severus said, "No, I suppose not, but I just wanted to be alone with you, Lily. We were stuck in the car with your parents for hours, and I couldn't so much as touch your arm without worrying about what they might think or say."

"Excuse me?" Lily asked, hurt. "'Stuck in the car?' My parents were nice enough to drive you here, Sev. How did you expect to get here without parents to take you?"

Realizing what she had said, Lily covered his mouth with her hands, shocked with herself. She was about to apologize, but Severus, hurt by her words, cut out, "And what did you want me to do? Yes, that's right, Lily. My parents aren't like yours. My mother's mental, and my father's a raving drunk. I didn't ask for your parents' sympathy-"

Just then, the door to the compartment opened, and James Potter peeked his head in. "Ah, is the unhappy couple fighting already?" he asked smugly, smirking at Severus and then grinning at Lily.

"Go away, Potter," Lily said, her teeth clenched.

"No, I rather think I'll stay and hear what ol' Snivelly has to say," James continued, stepping into the compartment. Sirius Black followed him.

"There's nothing to hear," Severus ground out, his fingers touching his wand. "Get out now, Potter, or you'll regret it."

"I don't think so, Snivellus," James sneered, smiling nastily. "You see, you left us all Stunned last year, but you won't get the last curse in this time around."

"That's right," added Sirius. "What d'you reckon we do to him, James?" he asked conversationally.

"Oh, I don't know," James replied casually. "But I assure you, Snape, it'll be painful," he said, getting right in Severus's face, his tone turning menacing. Leaning over and whispering into Severus's ear so only he could hear, James said, "You may think you have Evans now, but she deserves a hundred times better than you. I'd watch my back if I were you, *Snivellus*."

Growing hot with anger, Severus lost his temper and brought out his wand at lightning speed, jabbing it directly into James's neck. "Back off, Potter," he snarled. "You don't know anything, so shut up."

Smirking, James backed up, saying to Sirius, "C'mon, mate. Let's go. For now, Sniv, you're safe, but just you wait."

James and Sirius left, and Severus barked after them, "Cowards!"

When the compartment door had closed, Lily said, "Don't listen to him. He's an idiot with a bloated head."

Their earlier argument momentarily forgotten, Severus sighed. "Right," he muttered. "Right."

The rest of the journey was much calmer. Severus and Lily didn't speak of their disagreement. Finally, the Hogwarts Express pulled into the station at Hogsmeade. The students began disembarking from the train, and joining the growing crowd, Severus walked toward one of the thestral-drawn carriages with Lily, seeing Hogwarts off in the distance. Soon, their sixth year would begin.

Chapter Fourteen

Upon entering the Great Hall, Severus felt like he had never left Hogwarts. The familiar four house tables lined the length of the hall, with the head table at the front, where the teachers were already seated. Dumbledore was in his high-backed, thronelike chair in the middle, looking regal and wise as ever. Severus didn't think the man looked any different from the days when he himself had been a professor at Hogwarts. There were notable differences in the staff, however. Professor Trewlawney was not yet a teacher. The Defense Against the Dark Arts professor was seated on the end, a timid-looking man in his mid-forties with tufty hair and reading glasses. Severus remembered the man's name was Hermes Herman. If he recalled correctly, the man had had an "unfortunate accident" in the Forbidden Forest at the end of that year. In truth, Severus knew it had been linked to Voldemort.

His thoughts having drifted upon looking at the Great Hall and its inhabitants, Severus missed what Lily was saying.

"Sev?" she asked, a little annoyed. "Aren't you even listening to me?"

Reminded of their earlier argument on the Hogwarts Express, Severus diverted his attention back to Lily. "I'm sorry, Lily," he said sincerely. "I was just... er, distracted."

"That much was obvious," she replied, still not sounding too happy.

Now, gazing down into those bright green eyes, Severus felt hot and guilty. He didn't want to keep making her mad, but it seemed to come too naturally. Was it merely in his nature to piss people off?

"Honestly, Lily," Severus insisted, taking her hand. "I really am sorry. I didn't mean to ignore you. What were you saying?"

Sighing and relenting, Lily said, "I was saying that I think Potter will have just as much of a big head this year as all past. Look at him." She motioned toward the Gryffindor table.

There stood James Potter, looking so much like Harry, only his expression was arrogant and prideful. Severus couldn't hear what the

other boy was saying, but he was obviously boasting to his fellow students. With a slight pang of guilt for his past crimes, Severus realized he had been unfairly harsh toward Harry on numerous occasions. Even though Harry looked far too much like his father for Severus's liking, the more time he spent around Lily, the more he had come to understand that Dumbledore had been right: He was much more like his mother inside.

Rolling his eyes for dramatic effect, Severus retorted, "Well, what else is new? At least some things are nauseatingly predictable." His thin lips quirked a little on one side.

Laughing, Lily nodded. "Right you are, Sev."

Noticing Professor McGonagall leading the first years into the hall, Severus took that as their cue to take their seats. Lily and he parted ways, waving to each other. Taking a seat at the Slytherin table, Severus tried to purposefully keep himself as far removed from Avery and Mulciber as possible, but when the two other boys noticed him sitting alone, they ambled over to him, sitting on either side, much to Severus's dismay.

"Have a good summer, Severus?" queried Avery sarcastically.

"I'd say he did," sneered Mulciber, glaring over at the Gryffindor table to where Lily was seated. "Been spending all your waking time with that Mudblood, Severus? What's she got that's so worthwhile? A good shag, perhaps?"

"Don't you dare talk about Lily like that!" hissed Severus, immediately going for his wand.

"Hey, take it easy," Avery said, a little alarmed at Severus's reaction. "What's got your nuts in a twist?"

Putting his wand away, but keeping his fingers brushing the end, Severus scowled. "Just leave me alone, Avery."

"Oh, gone to being so formal now by using our last names, have we?" Mulciber asked nastily. "Fine, Snape. But I'd watch your back if I were you. You don't want to go messing with the wrong crowd. It might

have... dreadful consequences," he finished in a mock-concerned voice.

Avery and Mulciber left, snickering between them. Severus watched them leave, feeling sullen. He idly watched the Sorting and barely acknowledged the Sorting Hat's new song. No mention of the threat of Voldemort or unification of the houses was mentioned. Severus didn't bother to listen to Dumbledore's warnings about avoiding the Forbidden Forest and what items were banned from Hogwarts. His eyes rested on the back of Lily's head, wondering what the year ahead held.

Dinner was a pointless affair. He picked his way through the food, not bothering to taste it. As he made his way down to the Slytherin dormitories, Severus wondered yet again if returning to relive his life had been a mistake. True, he had remedied the problems at home... for now, but the Marauders and his fellow Slytherins would pose a definite problem. Also, the more time that passed, the more Severus realized the age difference between himself and Lily. That was one issue he hadn't taken into consideration when he agreed to live his life over again. His memories of Lily were from when he had been much younger, without the war to taint him. He felt like a dirty, old man robbing the cradle.

Making sure his belongings were all there, Severus decided to leave the dormitories and go for a short walk before curfew. Strolling the halls had always proven therapeutic in his other life. Severus walked the dungeons, going toward the Potions classroom and stopping to briefly glance inside. Beyond the worktables was the door to what had become his office and private storeroom. How odd it was to see something so familiar and yet so different. Horace Slughorn still occupied these rooms. Leaving the doorway, Severus proceeded a little farther, until coming to the spot where he knew the secret entrance to his private chambers had been. Again, they were not his. He wished they were, because at least then he could sleep alone and in privacy. He loathed the thought of having to share a room with others.

Eventually, he made his way up the stairs and to the first level. Severus walked past a now empty Great Hall. He let his mind wander

as his feet wandered. Some time later, he nearly bumped into someone.

"Mr. Snape, you very nearly gave this old man a heart attack," came Dumbledore's aged voice.

Gasping slightly, Severus took a step back and looked directly into the face of the man he had killed. Those piercing blue eyes were the same as ever, and Severus knew Dumbledore was probing him, suspicious. Of course, the headmaster had had reason to be suspicious of young Severus in his other life. Severus was among the students who had turned Dark, and now, with Dumbledore only a foot away, Severus couldn't help the natural reflexes of his mind as he placed the mental barriers between himself and the other man. Dumbledore, shocked, stopped trying to use Legilimency on Severus and frowned at him.

"Since when have you known how to employ Occlumency, Mr. Snape?" Dumbledore inquired sharply.

Oh, shit, thought Severus. "Er..." he said awkwardly, not knowing what to say.

Dumbledore had a thoughtful look on his lined face, but he didn't question further. No doubt the old man thought Severus had learned it as a way of protecting his thoughts because of the Dark Magic he knew.

"What are you doing wandering the corridors so late, may I ask? It's nearly curfew."

"Right, sorry, sir," Severus replied stiffly. He made to leave, unnerved by the whole encounter, when Dumbledore's voice trailed after him, asking, "Is something troubling you, Severus?"

Realizing the familiarity with which Dumbledore had addressed him, Severus stopped. He wanted to tell Dumbledore the truth. To be able to confide in just one person, as he had with Dumbledore after Lily was gone... but no, remembering how Dumbledore had used him to achieve his own means, Severus clammed up. He couldn't trust the man.

"No, sir," Severus replied evenly, walking away.

"Good night, then, Mr. Snape," Dumbledore called after him.

Choosing not the answer, Severus left, returning to the dungeons, clearly hearing the use of his last name again. Dumbledore wasn't close to him. Dumbledore wasn't his friend.

Chapter Fifteen

Severus endured two days and three nights of sharing the dormitory with people he now hated and attending boring and dull classes. He was already beginning to think it had been a mistake to return to Hogwarts, but Lily was here, and she was the only reason he had come back in the first place. He wondered how he would survive two more years of gruelling classes and annoyingly rude students.

His time with Lily was severely limited, but thankfully, today he would be having Double Potions with her. He knew the class would basically be a joke and prided himself on being a better Potions Master than Slughorn. Lily and he had always been partners in Potions, even after they had stopped being friends in his past life, and they had been the top two students in the class.

As Severus entered the classroom, he almost went to the front where he had stood and lectured as a teacher. Forcing himself to take his old seat as a student, Severus immediately smelled the vapors coming from three large cauldrons. The gold-colored cauldron was emitting very seductive scents, and as Severus smelled the fresh outdoor scent from the forest where Lily and he met, new parchment, and Lily's sweet hair, he knew it was Amortentia.

Within a minute, Lily had joined him and flashed him a quick smile.

"How are you holding up, Sev?" she asked.

"All right, I guess," he tried to say noncommittally. He didn't want to give her reason to worry.

Before Severus could reply, James and Sirius entered, talking boisterously, and took seats right behind them. Severus groaned to himself. How typical that Potter would choose to sit directly behind him, only so he could whisper taunts into Severus's ear and try to ruin his work. Thankfully, Slughorn followed closely behind, so James didn't have a chance.

"Good morning, everyone!" Slughorn's jovial voice boomed. "Scales out and potion-making kits, and of course, your copies of *Advanced Potion-Making*."

Severus heaved his old, tattered copy out of his bag. He already had everything else on the bench, as did Lily. Lily glanced at his old copy of the text, and he grimaced at it, thinking of Harry Potter using it and learning his spells. Thankfully, Severus's copy was clean of his writing. He remembered covering it with notes on improved methods to the protocols to different potions and how he had invented several spells during his sixth year in his other life. Deciding to keep those things in his mind, Severus knew it was less likely that anyone would find out his spells and use them against him.

"All right, then," Slughorn was continuing on, "I've got three potions here for you to take a look at. These are exactly the kind of thing you might expect on your N.E.W.T.s. You've probably heard of them, but probably haven't actually made them yourselves yet. Can anyone tell me what this one is?"

Severus knew it was Veritaserum. He knew Slughorn started every sixth year class with the same lecture at the beginning of the school year. He could have raised his hand if he wanted, but decided not to. With a bored look on his face, he glanced over at Lily, who was waving her hand excitedly in the air much like Hermione Granger used to.

"Yes, Miss Evans?" Slughorn asked, clearly pleased.

"It's Veritaserum, sir," Lily rattled off. "Without color and smell, it forces the drinker to tell the truth."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Slughorn. Severus thought the large man's buttons might pop off, he was so exuberant. He ambled over to the next cauldron and proceeded to ask the class what it was. In the back of the room, a Ravenclaw girl answered correctly that it was Polyjuice Potion and explained what it did.

Severus frowned at that cauldron, remembering how ingredients from his private stores had gone missing during Harry Potter's second and fourth years. He had never been able to prove Potter had stolen the ingredients, but his suspicions had been valid and strong. Polyjuice Potion was over-rated and overused, anyway. One hour of being in disguise was better than nothing, but Severus knew of better ways of hiding himself from being found out.

Finally, Slughorn came to the last cauldron and asked what it was. He waited patiently for someone to raise his or her hand. Severus glanced at Lily, thinking she might know what it was. He couldn't recall if she had known the first time around. Severus obviously knew, but he didn't want to say. However, he wondered if answering might put him in Slughorn's good graces. He had never really gotten fair recognition before for his brilliance at Potions because he had kept to himself.

Knowing it would give fuel to the fire for Potter and Black, Severus raised his hand regardless. He wasn't going to be a coward.

Slughorn, looking surprised, said, "Er, yes, Mr. Snape? You know the answer?"

"Yes, sir," Severus said evenly. "It's Amortentia, the most powerful, er, love potion in the world."

Slughorn's eyebrows were raised with shock, and he nodded. "Yes, yes, that's correct, Mr. Snape. Very good."

Severus wondered for a moment if Slughorn would award house points, but since he hadn't done so for Gryffindor or Ravenclaw, Severus didn't think he would. Instead, the large man went on to talk about how Amortentia worked: in that it couldn't create love. Here, Lily smiled at him, and he blushed a little, shaking forward his hair to conceal his cheeks. The potion merely created infatuation or obsession.

Potter sniggered loudly and turned around to gaze at Severus. "I bet that's the only reason Evans thinks she fancies you," he spat in a harsh, mocking whisper.

Black joined in the laughter. "Yeah, that's how Snivelly knew the answer to the question."

Severus bristled at their words, not wanting to give them more ammunition. Slughorn cleared his throat, saying, "Now, boys, let's place our attention on the lesson, shall we?"

James and Sirius sobered, and Slughorn explained the lesson for the day: making the Draught of Living Death.

Severus knew this potion without even glancing at the book. He idly began preparing the potion. Within twenty minutes, he had it bottled. Lily looked at him, astonished.

"Wow, I knew you were brilliant at Potions, Sev, but this is record timing for you. Have you been practicing over the summer or something?"

"Something like that," Severus replied nonchalantly.

"I was watching him," James blurted out, turning around. "He didn't do it the way it said in the book, so it's gotta be wrong. He's just trying to impress you, Evans; that's all."

"Shut up, Potter," Severus retorted. "Just because your head is inflated with thoughts of how great you are doesn't mean other people's minds aren't more focused on thinking about other things, like how to improve and think outside the box. Really, your narrowmindedness has reached a new level of pathetic."

"You take that back, Snape!" barked Sirius.

Slughorn came in between the boys, breaking up the potential fight. "That's quite enough, boys!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Snape, I had expected better of you." He picked up the vial on Severus's bench and examined it. "Although," he muttered, "you did successfully create the Draught... perfectly and very efficiently, I might add. Hmmm, well, perhaps I can overlook this little argument with your fellow students. Ten points to Slytherin. Keep up the good work."

Slughorn walked away, and Severus smirked triumphantly at Potter and Black. The lesson ended, and Lily walked out with Severus. She was beaming at him.

"That was great, Sev!" she exclaimed, holding onto his arm. "You not only made the potion perfectly, but your comeback to Potter was spot on!" She laughed.

Inside, Severus was glowing. He felt better than he had in a long time. Finally, he had gotten some recognition for his talents, and he had made Lily laugh.

Chapter Sixteen

The month of September was a mixed bag for Severus. He continued to spend a lot of time with Lily and found that he was growing closer to her, despite their occasional arguments and his feeling of being so much older. His mother was being taken care of well as far as he knew from correspondence with her. The wizarding world really was ingenious when it came to having to breach the gap in using owls versus sending things the Muggle way.

Regrettably, the Marauders were just as relentless as ever. James Potter in particular had made it his life's ambition, apparently, to torment Severus whenever the opportunity presented itself. Avery and Mulciber had started off strong with their threats and jeers toward Severus, but his tactic of ignoring them seemed to be working. They seemed to have grown bored after a couple of weeks without eliciting a reaction from their victim. Severus still kept the area around his bed warded when he was asleep. He wasn't foolish enough to trust them not to act when his back was turned.

Potions was practically a joyride for Severus. After his first class of the term where he demonstrated his brilliance in the subject, Slughorn had taken a special interest in him. After class one day in late September, Slughorn approached him, enthusiastically inviting him and Lily to his next Slug Club get together. Severus made to decline, but Lily, thinking it would be a good idea, insisted he join, so Severus gave in... only for Lily.

And so, Severus and Lily now found themselves in Slughorn's office on the last day of the month. The large man was doting on his pet students, asking them if they would like anything to eat or drink. He then sat down with a big thump into his padded, oversized chair, gazing upon his pupils like prizes.

"So, tell me, Severus," Slughorn said, beaming, "where did you inherit your Potions skills from? I remember your mother, although not well, and she didn't seem particularly interested in the subject."

Scowling, Severus muttered, "No inheritance, sir. Just hard work and dedication."

How typical that Slughorn would barely know of Eileen Prince. Severus knew his mother hadn't been anyone extraordinary when she had attended Hogwarts. She had been a quiet, surly Slytherin who had kept to herself and had been captain of the Gobstones Club. She had been plain, too, so she hadn't been attracting the attention of the opposite sex.

"Ah," Slughorn said dumbly, obviously unsure of what else to say. He turned his attention to someone else, leaving Severus feeling annoyed.

Severus glanced at Lily and whispered, "See why I didn't want to come here?"

"I'm sorry, Sev," she said apologetically, squeezing his hand for good measure. "I thought maybe a little social interaction would do you some good."

A little offended, Severus queried softly, "And why is that, Lily? You think I need it, as if I'm somehow incomplete otherwise?"

"No," Lily said in a hushed voice, trying not to draw the attention of the others around them. She looked at Slughorn and excused herself and Severus from the room, for which Severus was eternally grateful. He left with Lily, and they found an empty classroom, where they continued their conversation.

"Look, Lily," Severus said placatingly before he put his foot in his mouth again, "I don't want to start fighting."

"Neither do I," said Lily gently, coming closer to him. "I just meant... you deserve to have other friends besides me, Sev. I want others to see what I see in you."

While he was touched by her words and sentiment, Severus still sighed. "I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Lily, but maybe I don't want anyone else to be close to me."

"I don't think that's true," Lily countered gingerly.

Raising an eyebrow, he asked, "Why?"

"Because... because everyone needs friends, people who care about them, look out for them."

"I have you for that," Severus insisted. "I had people I used to call friends in my house, but they were only hanging around because of what I could give them, and that was knowledge about, er... Dark Magic."

"Yes, I've noticed you haven't been hanging around with them anymore, Sev. Ever since the end of last year, you've been different. You seem more mature in some ways. It sounds crazy, I'm sure, but when I look into your eyes now, I feel like someone much older is staring back at me."

Severus's heart was thudding quickly and heavily in his chest. How could she read him so well? Lily didn't need to use Legilimency to know what was on Severus's mind. He had always prided himself on being a closed book to the rest of the world, but Lily completely undid him at the seams, spilling open all the pages to be read in between the lines.

"R-really?" Severus stuttered, gulping.

"Are you nervous, Sev?" Lily asked innocently, confused by his reaction.

"No, sorry," he quickly recovered. "Just caught off guard. You do crazy things to me, Lily." He smirked wryly, trying to change the mood.

Lily just smiled at him. "Well, I still love you."

Severus was gazing at her pretty face, completely transfixed. Lily had amazed him yet again. While she was usually a sixteen-year-old girl in the way she acted, there were times when she utterly awed him, bringing him to a standstill. Severus was reminded all over again why he had come back in the first place.

This was his Lily. This was real.

As was the kiss they shared.

Author's Note: Yes, I know! It's horribly short, and I'm sorry:(I've had a really long and tiring day, but I really wanted to get something out to you all. I know it's rather fluffy, but I figured a little bit of fluff after so many chapters of angst, drama, and sadness would be okay. I'm not about to go making this story all fluffy... no way! That's nauseating just thinking about it! Okay, sorry that I'm babbling, but like I said, I'm tired, so I'm a bit loopy. Bear with me just a little longer.

I wanted to thank all my dear readers and reviewers again. I haven't been able to keep up with replying to all the reviews I receive, as I'm being inundated with too many, but I'm touched, truly. Your reviews mean so much to me. If you ask me a specific question, I will reply, but otherwise, I probably won't. And FYI - it's unnecessary to say, "Please update soon!" I know you're excited, but I do update very frequently, so don't worry about me not updating soon. It goes without saying.

Just curious - Does anyone want to take a stab at guessing what will happen in this story? That applies to subplots involving Severus's relationship with his mother, what happens to Eileen and Tobias, his days at Hogwarts, Lily, the Marauders, the fellow Slytherin "friends," the whole war and Voldemort, the Prophecy, Harry Potter (??), etc., etc., etc. Go wild and let me know what you think will happen!!

And finally, do any of you draw fanart? I'm looking for an accomplished artist who has their work online. If so, would you like to take a commission from me for this fic?

Chapter Seventeen

Severus and Lily left the empty classroom nearly an hour later, having spent the time simply enjoying each other's company and talking about any variety of topics. When they got to the point where they needed to part, Severus stopped, watching Lily's retreating form. He waited until she was out of sight and then made to turn and head down to the dungeons.

Not a moment after he turned, however, did James Potter seemingly appear out of the stonework and confront him.

Severus hadn't been expecting Potter, but he reached for his wand as soon as the opportunity arose. "What do you want, Potter?" he hissed.

Potter, for his own protection or merely to torment Severus, also had his wand out. "What are you playing at, Snape?" he asked nastily. "You think Evans will really stay with you when she could have any number of blokes in this school?"

"Oh, like you?" sneered Severus.

"Well, she may not want to admit it," said James pompously, "but I know she likes me. How could she not? I've got what every girl wants. I can't understand what she sees in you, Snape."

"Then that just proves how blind and arrogant you really are, Potter," Snape said condescendingly, narrowing his eyes. "Lily is a special girl, and she isn't about to settle for just anyone."

Snorting, James said, "But I'm not just anyone."

Incredulous, Severus glared down his nose at Potter, unable to understand how the boy could be so full of himself. Was it all really just for show, to cover his insecurities?

"Keep telling yourself that, Potter. Just because your thick head is incapable of grasping that *some* people see deeper than skin deep doesn't mean you're right. Lily and I have a history that you'll never

have with her, at least as far as I'm concerned. I'll personally see to it that you never have a chance with her."

"Is that a threat?" James asked pointedly.

"Maybe it is," said Severus almost lazily, quite enjoying rattling Potter.

"You arrogant bastard-" James started to say, losing his cool, and making to hex Severus.

"That will be quite enough, Potter," Severus snarled, his own wand now fully out and in James's face. When Severus spoke, there was an authority in his tone that hadn't been there before when he was younger. For a split second, Potter gaped at Severus.

Finally backing off, Potter said harshly, "You can't speak for Evans, you junior Death Eater. I know your real passion, and it's not love for another. You're in love with Dark Magic, Snape, and I know it. You'll go no where in life but to your doom."

"Be careful of what you speak, Potter," Severus said seriously, quite angered, but keeping his voice clipped nonetheless. "You don't know the half of it."

"But I saved your life once, you worthless prick," James said.

"Meaning what?" Severus queried. "Oh, yes, Potter... I quite remember that little incident," he said in a low voice, every word becoming more waspish. "You have no regard for my life. You were only saving you own necks. You think I have forgotten what you said that day you humiliated me in front of the rest of the school? You hate the very fact that I even *exist*, Potter. Tell me, what kind of man thinks so lowly of the lives of others? You think yourself worth more than everyone else, even your friends, I'm sure, but you don't fool me. You're just a pathetic coward who can run home to Mummy and Daddy and ask for anything you so desire. Without Lily, you're just a shell of a person. You only want her so you can feel you've somehow triumphed."

Years of practicing his intimidation techniques on unsuspecting students had given Severus the extra edge he needed to drive the

pointed nail deeper into the coffin. James Potter was nearly buried with insults, and dumbfounded, he had nothing to retort back with. They merely continued to glare at each other for several more seconds, and finally, James said, rather lamely, "Well, know this, Snivellus, I haven't forgotten that day in Potions... and I won't forget this conversation, either. Unlike you, I have friends who will back me up. I'd be careful if I were you."

With that, James left. Severus kept his wand out until the other boy had disappeared around the corner. Sighing, Severus returned to the dormitories. He had been effective in bringing Potter down a notch, but Severus knew many of the accusations he threw at the other boy could be true for himself as well. Hadn't he once thought the lives of others expendable, if only to get what he craved? Hadn't he once acted out of cowardice in serving Voldemort? He couldn't erase those memories, even if they were from another lifetime.

As Severus sat on his bed, grateful Avery and Mulciber weren't around, he wondered if he really did deserve Lily. It was true that he had loved her forever and had done whatever he could to protect her son, but had he done enough to right his wrongs? Did he honestly deserve another chance at life? What made him so special? Was Lily just some sort of unattainable goal, a wild chase, a trophy? Now that he had her, did he fear what he had?

He remembered Dumbledore's words: that his old memories would haunt him in this life, and only four months in, Severus knew this was a fact. As much as he tried to change events, he wondered if the outcomes would somehow wind up the same. Had Fate a cruel way of screwing him over not just once, but twice?

Don't be an idiot, Severus, he chided himself. You just kissed Lily full on the lips for the first time ever less than an hour ago. Haven't you always wanted her to return the affection you felt for her?

The ache in his chest that had been dull and constant before was now throbbing. Ever since the day he had driven her away in his other life, that pain was an everlasting reminder of his greatest mistake and worst memory. He couldn't understand why it hurt so much now. He had Lily, damn it. She was his as such as the sun

would rise in the morning, but what if the world ended tomorrow? There would be no sun. No Lily.

An emptiness, a pit of interminable depth, invaded his being, his very center. Severus could no longer pretend it didn't exist. Feeling hollow and desperate for an answer to this insurmountable feeling, Severus realized with a sinking feeling that it was him who he couldn't live with.

He could try all he wanted to make amends. He could have all the love in the world and beyond for Lily, but his soul's scars were permanent. They wouldn't heal as long as he still opened them from time to time. Inflicting irreversible damage on himself had become as much a part of him as breathing.

Was James right? As Severus worth so little? He hated himself. He should be happy. He knew, oh, how he knew, but damn those feelings to hell... Severus closed his eyes, wishing that when he opened them, he would find himself dead again. Hadn't merely blinking brought him back to this accursed life before? Why shouldn't the opposite be true as well?

He opened his eyes, seeing the top of his four-poster bed glaring back at him. There would be no escape. Unable to be truly happy, and loathing himself all the more for it, Severus took a dark turn that day, the allure of the darkness more inviting than it had been in a long time.

If Lily were there, she would have demanded of him what he was doing. Even Severus wasn't sure.

All he knew was that he was his own worst enemy.

Author's Note: Thanks for all your comments and guesses at what lies ahead!

This chapter was a difficult one to write. It felt much longer than it actually is, but I guess that could be because of its heaviness. There is a darkness here that hasn't been written about previously in this fic, but don't worry too much, my dear readers! I will tell you this: Severus is NOT going to go dark again. He's not going to join the Death

Eaters. He did learn a few things in his other life, and as much as he may be struggling now, he is strong. There is always hope.

Chapter Eighteen

Ever since sharing his first kiss with Lily and then the confrontation with James afterward, Severus had been cold and distant, even toward Lily. It was all self-induced, and while he knew he was doing it, it seemed he couldn't stop himself from suffering. Lily asked him what was wrong, but he didn't want to elaborate. With a shrug of the shoulders, Severus would leave her standing there, left to sadly watch his retreating form.

The weekend before Halloween, there was a Hogsmeade outing scheduled. Severus didn't feel like going. It was just another chance to put himself out there and risk being confronted by Potter and his gang, and if not them, then Avery and Mulciber. Even though the latter hadn't so much as spoken a word to Severus for the past few weeks, he had a bad feeling that they were talking about him behind his back. He knew being a Slytherin in love with a Muggleborn Gryffindor was mutiny, but he didn't care. He didn't care about much these days.

"Sev," Lily was begging him for the third time that Friday after classes, "why won't you go with me?"

Lily wanted to visit Hogsmeade. Of course she did. Lily was beautiful, intelligent, talented, popular, likable...

"And I told you, Lily," Severus retorted, growing aggravated at her insistence. "You could go with anyone. You have loads of friends."

"But I want to go with you," she insisted, her voice so welcoming and gentle. They were in an alcove by themselves, away from prying eyes.

Severus tried, in vain, not to glance into her eyes. He would be undone if he did, but sighing, he looked down at those green orbs, so accepting, so loving, and frowned. "Why me, Lily?" he whispered. "I mean... in general... why me?"

"C'mon, let's go somewhere a little more private," she said, knowing they needed to talk.

Nodding, Severus allowed her to lead him to an empty classroom nearby. After the door was closed, Severus muttered, "Muffliato."

"All right," she said, a little sternly. "What's going on, Sev? I know you haven't had the highest opinion of yourself in the past, but I thought you were doing so well for a while there. You dropped those supposed friends from your house last year. You kicked your horrible father out of the house. You took care of your mother and got her help. You've been even more brilliant than before in Potions, and I hear you're excelling wonderfully at Defense as well. You and I shared that kiss, but we haven't kissed since. Overall, I felt like we were really getting closer than ever, and now, I feel like you're pushing me away. Did I do something, Sev, because I really can't understand why you're acting this way?"

"It's not you, Lily; it's me," he started to say and watched as her face dropped.

"Oh, no, this is it, isn't it?" Lily asked, fearful of what he was going to say next. "You're breaking up with me, aren't you? People always start off with that whole 'It's not you; it's me' rubbish." She was babbling quickly, something she did whenever she was anxious. Severus could see her eyes shining.

"No, no, no," Severus said quickly, coming closer to her and enveloping her in his arms. "Lily, no... never that. I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me... but I certainly don't want you to cry or to think I want to lose your companionship. You're right - I have been difficult, and it's complicated, really complicated, to explain. Let's just say I had a major change of heart a few months ago. In my mind, I could see what a mess my life would turn out to be if I pushed you away and kept being friends with Avery and Mulciber."

It may not have been the whole truth, but without telling her he was reliving his life, it was the best Severus could do. In his mind, he always saw old memories of his past life, constant reminders of what had been, but also what could still be in this life.

"Oh, Sev," Lily exhaled, her voice laced with both concern and relief. She held fast onto him tightly. "I know I didn't like those old friends of yours, and yes, I was worried what might happen if you stayed friends

with them, but you wouldn't have joined You-Know-Who or anything crazy. I know you better than that. I knew you'd make that right decision."

Her words were haunting. Swallowing nervously, Severus murmured, "Don't be so sure of yourself, Lily. I did some pretty Dark stuff when I was with them. I know I told you it was just for fun, and that's the truth. What we were doing was entertaining to us, and that sounds sick now. I can't guarantee I won't break one day and do something awful again, though, especially to Potter."

Lily nodded. "Well, Potter might deserve it," she remarked.

"Maybe if he provokes me enough, but let's stop talking about this now, all right?" It was making Severus uncomfortable to be dwelling on his darker nature. He knew more than anyone what he was capable of, but if he could refrain from doing those things this time around, he would. He knew Lily wouldn't want to be with him if he turned out rotten.

"All right," agreed Lily, releasing her hold on him enough to see his face. "Are you feeling better now?"

"A little," Severus replied, which was the truth.

"Good. And just so you know, even though you *should* know, you silly git," Lily teased lightly, "I like you just the way you are. Don't doubt that, even when you're doubting yourself."

Severus nodded. Even though it was difficult for him to grasp how any one person could love him and accept him as Lily did, he knew she wasn't lying to him simply to make him feel better. He could doubt himself, but the moment he started doubting what Lily felt for him, he would need to mentally kick himself for being so stupid.

"Now, will you go with me to Hogsmeade, you stubborn prat?" she asked, still teasing.

"What's with the name calling?" Severus queried, smirking slightly, his mood improving by the minute.

"Come on, now, Sev," Lily said, a little impatient. "Well, will you?"

"All right, all right, but just because you asked so nicely," he gave in.

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As Severus and Lily walked down the path from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade, the chilly autumn air blew, rustling the colored leaves on the nearby trees. Some trees were almost bare, in fact. The village lay beyond them just a little.

"Where would you like to go?" asked Lily.

"Somewhere more private. Definitely not the Three Broomsticks. Far too crowded."

"Where would you suggest, then?"

"How about the Hog's Head?" Severus suggested.

"That old place?" questioned Lily, wrinkling her nose at the rundown pub. "Isn't it a bit... shady?"

"It's not that bad. I've been there before," said Severus automatically.

"You have? When?" Lily sounded surprised. Students weren't known for going to the Hog's Head.

Realizing his error, for Severus had been referring to his old life, he lied, "Oh, just once with some house mates... a long time ago."

Not looking entirely convinced, Lily relented. "Well, all right. I trust your judgment, Sev."

They made their way down the main street, going past several shops that were frequented by students: Honeydukes, Dervish and Bangs, and of course, the Three Broomsticks. When they reached the edge of the village, they turned and walked a little farther. The broken sign to the pub hung as it ever had. While some things had changed with time, it seemed the Hog's Head never would.

They entered. Only a couple other people were inside, both of whom were sitting at the bar, not giving the two young students a second glance. From behind the bar, an old man with grisly grey hair and piercing blue eyes glared at them.

Severus indicated for Lily to follow him to a nearby table. He looked around at the all-too-familiar setting. He had been here many times in his past life, including the infamous night he had overheard the prophecy. If he hadn't wanted privacy so much, he wouldn't have come here, but he wouldn't be going upstairs where the scene of his old crime had occurred.

"What'll you be having?" barked the old man.

"Just two butterbeers," Severus called back. He inwardly grimaced. Drinking butterbeer was so juvenile, but he didn't think the barman would be serving an underage wizard firewhiskey.

"That's Dumbledore's brother," Severus whispered to Lily.

"Really?" Lily whispered back, amazed. "Now that you mention it, he does look similar."

Just then, Aberforth Dumbledore came to the table with two butterbeers. Lily thanked him, but Aberforth only grunted back.

"He seems like Dumbledore's opposite," Lily murmured.

Shrugging, Severus didn't comment. His encounter with the old man hadn't been pleasant, and he had certainly been rough when he'd thrown him out of the pub.

They spent the next hour in the Hog's Head, passing the time nicely. Lily decided the place wasn't so bad after all. Once they were done, Severus paid the barman, and they left.

Upon stepping back into the cool autumn air, however, they were ambushed. Lily screamed as someone grabbed her from behind. Thinking it to be Potter and his gang, Severus yelled, "Let her go, Potter!"

"I'm not Potter," replied a gruff voice, and Mulciber stepped out of the shadows. He was holding Lily threateningly, his hand over her mouth.

Avery and two other Slytherins, Wilkes and Rosier, joined him. "Now, we're going to show you what we meant when we said to watch your back, Snape," Avery hissed.

Chapter Nineteen

"Now, we're going to show you what we meant when we said to watch your back, Snape," Avery hissed.

"Let her go," Severus hissed back just as venomously. "Your quarrel is with me. Leave Lily out of this."

"Oh, I don't think so," Avery said mockingly. "You fail to realize that this Mudblood filth is the reason you've stopped being our friend and starting being our enemy. She's to blame just as much as you are."

"Don't call her that!" Severus yelled, his wand out in front of him, trying to aim it at all the others, but finding it difficult.

"But it's the truth, ain't it?" Wilkes cut in.

"Here's the deal, Snape," Avery said. "We'll let you go without so much as a scratch if you let us have some fun with your girl here. How about it?"

"No deal," Severus snarled. "I'll ask again nicely: Let Lily go."

Mulciber was leering at Lily, breathing down her neck with a sick look in his eyes. "Pretty for a Mudblood," he started to say, but with one swift motion, Severus had Stunned him. There was no warning. A simple flick of the wrist, and Mulciber was down, leaving Lily free.

"Go, Lily!" Severus shouted.

Lily hesitated, fear covering her features. "No, Sev!" she protested. "What about you?"

"I'll be all right; just go!" he insisted, as the others drew closer to him.

"You'll pay for that one, Snape," Rosier grunted. "Think you can outsmart us? We outnumber you."

Lily stood there and made to move toward Severus as the three Slytherin thugs surrounded him. "Severus!" she cried, clearly frightened and worried for him.

"Damn it, Lily! Go!" Severus yelled.

"I'll get help!" she called back, finally leaving and disappearing from sight.

Severus breathed a sigh of relief that she was, at least, out of harm's way. He sized up the others. They were all sixteen or seventeen years old, and while they knew a lot of Dark Magic, thanks mostly to him, they ought to be no match for a grown wizard.

"You made a serious mistake," Severus hissed. He made a slashing motion with his wand, causing a mean cut to appear on Wilkes's cheek, just like he'd done to James Potter a few months ago.

Momentarily taken by surprise, Wilkes covered his bloodied cheek with his hand and bared his uneven teeth at Severus. He tried to throw a burning hex back at Severus, but it was a feeble attempt. Severus easily blocked it.

"Who's next?" he asked, almost daring them to fight dirty, as if this were merely a game.

Rosier shouted, "Incarcerous!"

With a short laugh, Severus blocked his spell as well. "Amateurs, the lot of you," he taunted them now. "You think you can beat me in a fight? You give me far too much notice by saying the incantation out loud."

"Shut up, Snape!" Avery barked. "You forget that we have connections who can teach us all the Dark Magic they know, spells far more advanced than you could ever teach us."

"Like Lucius Malfoy, I presume?" Severus asked. "The man is a joke."

"I dare you to say it to his face next time you see him and see how well you're received," Avery retorted. With what looked like a rude hand gesture, Avery flicked his wand. Without saying anything, he had tried to curse Severus.

Severus wasn't sure what spell Avery was trying to use, but he blocked it just in time. Smirking, he stated, "Gladly, and you'll have to do better than that."

He was just about to Stun Avery when he suddenly felt something hit him from behind. Severus felt the impact of Mulciber's spell and was blasted off his feet. Lying on his stomach on the ground, Severus berated himself for a split second for wasting time taunting the others. He had foolishly let his guard down, and in that moment, Mulciber had come back to consciousness. He tried to stand, but a heavy shoe dug into his back, pressing him harshly into the gravel and dirt.

"Not so tough now, are you, Snape?" Mulciber's voice came from above.

Severus could just see Avery, Rosier, and Wilkes as they joined Mulciber. A well-aimed kick caught him right in the stomach, then another to the ribs. The four Slytherins took to beating Severus with brute force for the next few minutes, and he inwardly groaned, wondering if Lily would be back with help soon. He felt humiliated and stupid. How could he have been reduced to this pathetic pile on the ground so quickly by a group of students? He knew his wand was lying several feet away. He had lost it in the blast.

Then, he heard a word he knew would bring him enormous amounts of pain.

"Crucio," someone uttered, emotionlessly.

As excruciating pain rippled through his battered body, Severus refused to cry out. It sounded like Mulciber had cast it. He endured it a second time. All the while, through the beating and the cursing, he would not be weak and cry or shout in agony.

Then, he heard another voice. An old voice.

"What the bloody hell do you kids think you're doing?" the old man demanded angrily.

The Slytherins had been caught. Panicking, they ran off, afraid of being captured by whomever had come to Severus's rescue. Then,

he felt gentle hands on his back and Lily's soft voice, distressed and breaking.

"Sev, oh, Sev," she was sobbing. "What did those bastards do to you?"

"Watch it, Missy," the old man rasped.

With a groan, Severus rolled over and sat up. It was Aberforth Dumbledore.

"What happened to you, boy?" Aberforth gruffly demanded. "No matter, let's get you back to my brother. He'll want to know about this."

Severus tried to stand, but nearly falling over, it took both Lily and Aberforth to support him. They led him back into the Hog's Head and into a back room. Gingerly sitting him down, Lily handed him his wand.

"I found it on the ground," she explained, concern etched all over her face.

Severus nodded weakly and murmured, "Thanks."

Aberforth was now at the fireplace, tossing a handful of Floo powder into the grate. "Albus Dumbledore," he stated.

Within seconds, Dumbledore's face appeared in the flames. "Yes, Aberforth?" he asked, obviously surprised.

"Albus, we have a problem. One of your students has been injured by others."

Dumbledore looked past Aberforth and into the room, his eyes locking with Severus's.

Chapter Twenty

For what seemed like forever, Dumbledore's piercing blue eyes gazed into Severus's black ones. Severus, physically and mentally weakened by the attack, felt undone in front of the old man, and he didn't have the energy or the inclination to put up his usual barriers. If Dumbledore was surprised by this, he didn't say so, and no emotion registered on his wrinkled face.

Finally, the headmaster spoke. "Bring him through the Floo, Aberforth."

Severus allowed Aberforth and Lily to help him through the fireplace and into Dumbledore's office back at Hogwarts. They led him to one of the armchairs that sat directly in front of the fireplace, and as Severus was seated, he realized with a start that this was the very chair he had oftentimes occupied when he was a professor and a spy. Countless nights of reporting to Dumbledore, of bearing his soul to the old man, only to feel betrayed in the end...

"Do you need me for anything else, Albus?" Aberforth gruffly asked.

Severus heard Dumbledore's response in the negative. Their voices seemed far away, but the gentle weight of Lily's hand on his shoulder kept him grounded; it felt close and welcome. Aberforth left a minute later, leaving Dumbledore standing in front of Severus. Severus didn't look up to meet his eyes this time.

"Miss Evans," Dumbledore addressed Lily, "are you all right?"

"Physically, yes," she replied. "But Severus-"

"Yes, I know, Miss Evans," Dumbledore said evenly. "I need to talk with Severus. You may go, and please tell Madam Pomfrey that Severus will be along shortly."

Severus cast a half-mustered glare at Dumbledore for being so curt with Lily. He wanted to protest, to demand she be allowed to stay, but after a quick squeeze on the shoulder, Lily walked toward the exit and left.

"How are you feeling, Severus?" queried Dumbledore.

"How do you think I'm feeling, Headmaster?" Severus mumbled. If he had more energy, he could have spoken with more vigor. Instead, he now fixed his eyes on the aged wizard, carefully sizing him up and tracking his every move.

"Are you severely injured from the attack? I can take you to the infirmary should you need it."

"I'm fine," Severus muttered.

"That's a matter of opinion, I'm afraid," Dumbledore said thoughtfully, stroking his beard as he slowly paced.

Severus intently watched him for a couple of minutes, wondering if he would elaborate. When Dumbledore remained silent, Severus questioned impatiently, "What do you want with me, sir? You know what happened."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, I know what happened, Severus," he said softly, stopping in midstride. "I have seen it all in your mind."

Severus thought as much. He frowned. "So, now that you've successfully invaded my mind, what more is there to say?"

"I am concerned for you, Severus," Dumbledore said firmly.

Unable to help himself because of past hurt, Severus bristled. "Oh? And you've just now noticed? You didn't seem to be concerned last year when Black almost got me killed. You didn't seem to care any of the times Potter and his friends humiliated me in front of countless others."

"I am not talking about the likes of James Potter, Severus," Dumbledore interrupted gravely. "I am referring to your old friends, the very ones who tormented you today. Mulciber will be expelled for using an Unforgivable, of course, but the others will simply be severely punished. I'm concerned for you, Severus, because for a long time, I feared you would join them."

"And what if that was the case, sir? Then I suppose you would pride yourself in being right yet again for priding your fellow Gryffindors and for stepping on the Slytherins. You have *no* idea what I've been through, Headmaster, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"I know some of what has been troubling you, Severus," Dumbledore spoke with that sickening compassion that Severus so loathed. "Your situation at home is bad as well."

Severus, utterly incensed, stood. "How *dare* you invade my privacy! You took advantage of me in a moment of weakness! What goes on at my home is none of your business. Don't you think I would have told you if I wanted you to know, if I felt I trusted you?"

"Why don't you trust me?" Dumbledore asked benignly.

That was a loaded question. Could Severus really hold his past life's interactions with the old man against him? Now that Dumbledore knew about Eileen, Severus couldn't help but stab back. "If you think you know anything about my situation at home, then why didn't you help your sister?"

He knew it was a low blow. He knew it was risky. But Severus was angry and offended. He wanted out of that room. His eyes were darting around, panicky.

"And how would you know about that?" Dumbledore asked, his voice now laced with aggression. "You overstep your boundaries, young man. Severus, sit down!" Dumbledore bellowed.

Severus froze. He had rarely ever witnessed Dumbledore so enraged, but he was reminded again of how powerful the headmaster was. He could command anyone's attention with his words alone. Relenting, Severus sank into the chair, too tired to care anymore. He buried his face in his hands, blinking back the tears that were threatening to spill over.

Dumbledore sighed and took the seat opposite of his young student. "Severus," he said, calm once again, "I don't know what to make of you. It is true that I was worried about your path for a long time... seeing you surrounded by those who were your tormentors today, but

I also know you have been good friends with Lily Evans since before you arrived at Hogwarts. I have seen a remarkable change in you this year. Lily's good influence has brought out your better nature. You have stopped being friends with Mulciber and Avery, but it is for the right reason? Have you done this for Miss Evans or because you knew it was the wrong path? You can see why my concern is still valid, can you not? I wonder what your motives are behind all this, Severus. You trust no one. You somehow have learned Occlumency to a level that is beyond what I have ever seen in someone your age. I can understand your shame for wanting to hide what goes on at home, but what else are you hiding, Severus?"

"I told you, sir, that is none of your business," Severus ground out. He pulled his hands away from his face. Having overcome his initial inclination to cry, the hurt was now written in loathing all over his angular face. Severus glared at Dumbledore. "You think you're so noble, don't you? Everyone has their demons. If I had half the skeletons in my closet you do, I could populate a graveyard with them. Yours, Dumbledore, is a battlefield of victims."

Severus was referring, of course, to Dumbledore's past alliance with Grindelwald.

Dumbledore was confused and once again furious. "That will be quite enough, Severus," he stated firmly. "While I am glad you have chosen not to align yourself with certain individuals, I cannot say I am pleased with your attitude. You will, of course, need to stop by the infirmary and be checked out by Madam Pomfrey to ensure your injuries are properly treated. I will make arrangements about your sleeping situation, as I do not think it wise for you to remain near those boys."

Severus glowered. Dumbledore had given him no reason to trust him. The old man didn't seem concerned about his physical injuries needing to be dealt with first. No, Dumbledore had insisted on talking with him and badgering him for information. No doubt Dumbledore's reasoning behind removing Severus from sharing a dormitory with those junior Death Eaters was more because he didn't trust Severus's judgment enough to be around them and not break into joining them.

"Very well," Severus muttered. "May I go now, *sir*?"

"You may," Dumbledore replied. "Good afternoon, Severus."

Severus left Dumbledore's office feeling worse than when he had entered. He went to the infirmary, not knowing where else to go. Upon entering, he was almost knocked over by Madam Pomfrey as she came bustling toward him.

"It's about time you arrived, Mr. Snape," she admonished him, leading him to one of the cots. "Lie down and let me have a look at you, then."

The aches from the repeated kicks to his chest, stomach, and back were settling in now, and the effects from the Cruciatus still had his nerves frazzled. Not bothering to argue, Severus complied and lay down on the bed.

The mediwitch tutted as she examined him, shaking her head. Severus was used to her ministrations, both as a child and as an adult. While he would usually refuse to submit to her care right away, she would always win in the end. She was like a stern grandmother who spoke with a little edge in her voice, but her touch was gentle and her manner was kind.

"What did those horrible boys do to you, Mr. Snape?" she asked, clearly appalled. "And why didn't the headmaster send you here right away? I'll be having a word with him after I'm done tending to you, dear."

In spite of himself, Severus smirked. No one wanted to be on the receiving end of one of Poppy Pomfrey's tirades. "I'm sure Lily told you already," Severus replied. "I guess the headmaster felt it more important to find out directly from me what happened first."

"Miss Evans didn't witness your torture, Mr. Snape," Madam Pomfrey countered. She treated the wounds as she spoke. "And next time the headmaster thinks it more important to talk to a student who has just been beaten and cursed, I'll make sure he doesn't live it down for a week. Now, what happened exactly? I need to know so I can properly treat you."

Severus sighed. "Well... they kicked me several times... and then, Mulciber, he- he used the Cruciatus on me, twice."

Madam Pomfrey gasped deeply, nearly dropping the vial she was holding. "My dear child!" she exclaimed, affronted. "And Professor Dumbledore knows this?"

Severus nodded.

Severus imagined Madam Pomfrey was mentally calling Dumbledore all manner of names right now, by the look on her face. She finished what she could for now and said, "Very well. You will need to stay here overnight to be monitored, just in case. It's not everyday that one student suffers from an Unforgivable under the hands of another. I'm going to talk with the headmaster now, Mr. Snape. You had better be right here in this bed when I return."

A part of Severus wanted to ask to go along, for he was dreaming of seeing Madam Pomfrey verbally take Dumbledore down a notch or two. He really was exhausted and sore, though, and he had no desire to return to the Slytherin dormitories or common soon. So, which was a rare case indeed, Severus agreed and leaned back into the pillow, surrendering to sleep.

Just before the mediwitch left the hospital wing, she placed a comforting hand on the young man's arm, murmuring, "You're a brave boy, Severus."

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After alerting Madam Pomfrey, Lily wanted badly to see Severus again, but she imagined Dumbledore would still be talking with him. In a little while, she would go to the infirmary and see if he was there.

She went to the Gryffindor common room instead, finding a seat near the fireplace. The warmth of the fire felt comforting and inviting after what had happened outside in Hogsmeade. She hoped those awful boys got their comeuppance. Glaring into the flickering flames, Lily's thoughts roamed back to the moment Severus had pleaded with her to flee. She hated herself for leaving him like that, but she had gotten

help. Still, thinking about the situation now, Lily wished she would have stayed and fought.

Then again, she didn't know how she would have handled herself against four Slytherin boys who knew Dark Magic. She didn't know the details yet of what they had done to poor Severus, but the state she had found him in five minutes after leaving him had spoken of unbound fury and torment.

She was glad for the emptiness of the room. Within an hour, most of the students would be returning from Hogsmeade. Sighing, Lily leaned back into the chair and closed her eyes, but she was disturbed a moment later by a voice.

"Lily, are you all right?"

Startled, Lily's lids fluttered open, and she noticed James standing there. Had he just addressed her by her first name?

"Potter?" she asked, confused by what sounded like genuine concern in his voice.

"I heard what happened," he said. His unruly hair was messier than usual, like he'd been running to get back to Hogwarts. The cold had reddened his cheeks and nose.

"Oh, really?" Lily inquired sharply, displeased at how quickly gossip spread. "And what did you hear exactly?"

"That you and Snape were attacked by some Slytherins."

Lily figured those same Slytherins had started the gossip... unless other students had somehow witnessed the fight and not intervened.

"That's right," she said bitterly. "Funny you should only be concerned about me. Severus was the one who was severely injured. I'm fine."

James scowled and dropped into the seat across from Lily. "Well, he shouldn't have been hanging around with that type if he didn't want to get harmed."

"How can you be so cruel, Potter? Severus wasn't 'hanging around with' them. They came to him and hurt him!"

If it wasn't bad enough that James was bothering her, the rest of the Marauders came into the room just then.

"Rough luck, eh, Evans?" Sirius asked. "I heard Snivellus really got what was comin' to him."

"Oh, that's rich, coming from you, Black!" Lily yelled, standing up. "Why can't you lot just leave him alone? Don't you see he's got it bad enough with his own house, let alone with you all picking on him? They attacked *him*!"

"Whoa, calm down, Lily," Lupin said.

Lily glared from one boy to the other. James was still sitting in the chair, looking stunned. Sirius still had a smug look on his face, and Lily wanted nothing more than to hex it off. Lupin was standing quietly by the portal into the room, and Pettigrew was cowering like his usual self behind him.

"Right," Lily said, more upset than she had been. "If you don't mind, I'm going to the library, and don't you dare follow me."

Lily left the Gryffindor common room before any of them could say a word.

James glared at Sirius. "Did you have to make her even more furious, Padfoot?" he groaned.

"What?" Sirius asked, feigning innocence.

Lupin rolled his eyes and left the common room as well. He was concerned about Lily, and although they didn't talk much, Lupin and she had always gotten along fine. He certainly didn't condone the way his friends treated Severus, but he was too afraid to stand up to them and say anything most of the time. With his condition, he felt lucky to even have friends, and he didn't want to threaten the relationship.

Lily was already several paces ahead when Lupin saw her. He followed her, wondering if she was really going to the library. He had a feeling she was more likely going to the infirmary to visit Severus.

Catching up with her, Lupin called, "Hey, Lily, wait up!"

Lily stopped in her tracks and turned. "Remus, what are you doing?" she questioned, a little annoyed, her eyebrows furrowed.

"Sorry," he huffed, winded. "I just- wanted to apologize for their behavior. What Sirius said was out of line."

"Why don't you tell him that yourself, then?" Lily asked hotly. "Or better yet - why don't you apologize on behalf of your friends to Severus for all the times they've been rotten to him?"

Lupin shifted uneasily. "I, uh... Lily, please. I just wanted to say I'm sorry for what happened to you... and Sn- er, Severus. Even he doesn't deserve that."

"Gee, how gracious of you, Remus," scoffed Lily. "'Even he doesn't deserve that.' No, he most certainly does not. He deserves so much better."

"Well, he doesn't exactly make it easy for anyone other than you to talk to him. He's always so... unpleasant."

"What's the worse Severus would do to you if you didn't threaten him, Remus? Really?"

"He'd sneer at me, most likely."

Lily laughed softly. "Yes, that does sound like him. Listen, Remus... thanks for your concern, but right now, I'd just like to be alone, okay?"

"Okay," Lupin gave in, leaving her in peace.

Lily walked alone for a while, wondering if Dumbledore was done talking with Severus and what the headmaster had said to him. She wished again that she hadn't fled like some sort of a coward. She had known him for a long time. He was her oldest friend, her closest

friend, and more than that now. Shuddering at the thought of something horrible happening to him, Lily vowed she would never leave him to fend for himself alone ever again.

After a considerable amount of time, Lily decided to go to the infirmary and see if Severus was there. Sure enough, upon stepping into the room, she found him in bed, sleeping soundly. Taking a seat next to the bed, Lily placed a hand on his arm.

"Never again, Sev, will I leave your side. I love you," she said softly, a tear falling down her cheek, just for him.

Chapter Twenty-One

Lily sat with Severus for the remainder of the afternoon. Sometime later, Severus woke, and when his vision cleared enough to see Lily sitting there, he smiled weakly.

"Hello," he said thickly, the heaviness of the sleep and the potions affecting him.

"Hey, Sev," Lily replied gently, leaning over and taking his hand. "How are you feeling?"

"All right, I guess," Severus said, groaning some as he shifted his weight to sit up more.

"That's good," Lily murmured. "My goodness, Sev... I was really worried about you. What did they do to you exactly?"

"Mostly kicked me several times. Mulciber used the Cruciatus on me... twice."

Gasping, Lily exclaimed, "That's awful! Oh, Sev, I'm so sorry... Surely Dumbledore expelled Mulciber for that?"

Severus nodded weakly. "Yes, he's gone, and the others will be severely punished, whatever that might mean."

"Serves them right, those bloody bastards," Lily ground out savagely.

Not accustomed to hearing such harsh words come from Lily's mouth, Severus smirked. He chuckled softly. "Listen to you, Lily," he remarked.

"What?" she asked, still upset at Severus's tormentors. "I don't find anything funny about this, Sev."

"I'm sorry," he said, trying to stop himself from laughing further at Lily's indignant expression. "It's just not like you to speak so meanly."

Lily, seeing his point, relaxed. "I suppose you're right," she agreed, smiling a little. "Well, I'm glad to see you awake and okay."

Severus murmured his thanks, and then a silence fell between them. So many thoughts went unsaid among them. If Severus had heard Lily's quiet declaration about never leaving his side, what would he have said? Now that he was awake, Lily kept those words to herself. Somehow, it meant more that way. Too many times people exchanged meaningless platitudes, and when the true moment of testing loyalty, trustworthiness, and love came, so many fell in defeat. Lily didn't want to be one of those people. She was a Gryffindor after all, wasn't she? Hadn't she broken down the age-old barrier between houses and proven that a Gryffindor could indeed love a Slytherin?

The same was true for Severus. He had lived years without Lily in his old life. He knew what it was to love, and for the first time, he felt that love returned. The old Lily had been his best friend, but this time, he knew they were closer than ever before. He wasn't the type of person to express what he was feeling very often, and if Lily was to keep her thoughts inside, so would he, for now. A part of him was almost afraid he might lose her again if he simply said the wrong thing. Hadn't his words done irreversible damage before?

While calling Lily a Mudblood had been a terrible thing to do, Severus knew it was so much more than that which had caused Lily to finally separate herself from him in his other life. Years of Lily making excuses for his poor behavior and choice of friends had finally come to an end. Severus was far from laughing now. Her kind words, "I'm glad to see you awake and okay," were too kind.

"It wasn't long ago that I was one of them, you know," Severus remarked with self-loathing.

"But you're not anymore, Sev; you're not," Lily protested. "You talked with Dumbledore. What did he think?"

Frowning, Severus spat, "He seemed to think I'm still suspicious enough to warrant invading my mind."

"What do you mean?" asked Lily, shocked and curious.

"Dumbledore is a very good Legilimens, Lily," Severus explained with a sigh. "He can read people's minds and find what he's looking for."

He questioned my motives - seemed to think I was probably only acting differently for your sake."

"But that's ridiculous!" Lily demurred. "I know you're not doing it for me. You helped your mother, for example. You were doing that out of the kindness of your own heart, not for me."

Severus considered what she said. While it was true that his helping Eileen had been for Eileen's benefit (and his own), Severus couldn't help but wonder if most of his actions would have still been negative had it not been for Lily. He had claimed to have protected Harry and worked for Dumbledore all those years in his past life simply for Lily... or in her memory, anyway. Did he truly have no motivation of his own to do what was good and right?

Severus had spent many nights awake as a professor wondering that very thing. What was his nature? Lily would tell him he was a good person, and Dumbledore in his old life would have told him the same, at least a few years after Severus had been working for the Order of the Phoenix. If he was good, then why had he been drawn to that which is dark and evil? A chance to prove himself, to be powerful in his own right... but he knew now how foolish he had been in his youth before.

As much as he had tried to hate Harry Potter, through resentment of losing Lily and the boy being the son of James Potter, time was a strange thing. The passage of time had changed him, and perhaps Dumbledore had been right about one thing. A man couldn't simply change sides because of his feelings for one person and then not go through further evolution in all the years that would follow. Especially now, being forced to literally relive his life, Severus saw the pattern. The mistakes he had made before were so glaringly evident now, instead of mere blurred memories that he could glance back upon through a telescopic lens.

Now, at least, Severus could believe with some conviction that he was consciously choosing to act for the right reason: because of the intrinsic goodness of those actions. Finally, he surrendered to the truth of his present existence and nodded. "I suppose you're right," he agreed, although it wasn't easy for him to accept.

Lily had watched him as he mentally deliberated, knowing it was difficult for him to admit that fact - that he really was a good person.

"You *are*, Sev," she stressed. "If you need to be reminded, I'll gladly do it for you. Besides, I'm not the only person who cares about your welfare."

At this, Severus raised an eyebrow. "Oh, really?" he inquired.

"Yes," Lily said, pausing. "After I told Madam Pomfrey about you being attacked and injured, I went to the Gryffindor common room. I really just wanted to be alone, but of course, knowing my luck, Potter and Black had to come in minutes later. Potter acted all concerned about me, and I told him it was you who was hurt, not me. The idiot shut up shortly after that, and I left."

Severus snorted. "I hardly see how this means anyone else was concerned about my wellbeing, Lily. It's not surprising that they would react that way."

"Impatient boy, let me finish," Lily said, half-joking, half-irritated. "Anyway, once I was in the corridor, Remus approached me. He said he was sorry for what happened to us, both of us, Sev."

Severus scowled. It was typical of Lupin to be the peacemaker. Knowing the man in his other life as a fellow professor and member of the Order, Severus had eventually come to tolerate the man, even though he didn't much care for him. It was true enough that Lupin had been cordial toward him as an adult and hadn't engaged in the activities of harming him like Potter and Black had in their youth, but neither had he done anything to stop them.

"How *thoughtful* of him," Severus sneered.

"Sev," Lily insisted, "you know he meant well."

"Oh, he always means well enough, Lily, but if he really cared, he would stand up to his supposed friends."

"True enough," Lily conceded, "but I think he's just afraid of losing their friendship. He's got a problem... that illness that affects him so

much... He knows what it feels like to be different, Sev. Maybe you two could relate."

"I don't think so," Severus disagreed, turning stubborn on purpose. "You mean to tell me that you still think he just has a 'problem,' an 'illness,' Lily? He's a bloody werewolf. A dangerous, vicious monster once a month. That's the truth, and before you try to defend him, I *know* it's not his fault, but being friends with reckless people like Potter and Black almost led to my death last year. Black, in fact, thought it would be funny. We've had this discussion, I know, but I still have no desire to spend too much time around him."

Bad vibes. Bad repercussions. Severus visibly shuddered thinking about every incident he'd had in the Shrieking Shack. Lily had no idea the fear that place gave him, first because of the werewolf Lupin, but later because of much more serious things. How could he tell her the extent of the damage? Not trusting Lupin when they had taught together, thinking Lupin had been in on the betrayal with Black for telling the location of the Potters to the Dark Lord... Being brutally knocked unconscious by the three students he had been trying to protect, including Lily's own son, as he was trying to save them from the two men who he thought responsible, in part, for Lily's death... and finally, his own fate met in that shack... Lily's green eyes staring down upon him as he drew in one last rattling breath. His mind was whirling, one true nightmare leading to another.

Witnessing Severus's fast and shallow breathing, the cold sweat dripping down his paler than usual face, the scared look in his frenzied eyes, Lily reached for his hand, utterly worried for him, but hoping to stabilize him. She had no idea why the mention of Lupin should have this terrible effect on him.

"Sev," Lily pleaded, "what's wrong?"

Severus flinched at her touch, closing his eyes, all those horrific visions pooling relentlessly in front of him. He opened his eyes and locked with Lily's green orbs, begging, "I'm so sorry, Lily; I'm so sorry. Please forgive me..." Unable to stop himself, Severus recoiled and squeezed his eyes shut, forcing the stubborn tears from falling,

writing humiliation all over his face. On top of everything else, he didn't need that, too.

"Severus," Lily breathed, now very concerned. "What's the matter?" Had those boys' torture done this to him? All she could figure was that he was somehow suffering from the lasting effects of the Cruciatus. In that moment, Lily thought he was bordering on insanity. She was speechless.

Severus forced himself to calm down. Years of hiding his true feelings made it easy enough to erect the necessary barriers quickly and effectively. When he returned more to a normal state, Severus opened his eyes again and said stiffly, "My apologies, Lily. That was... unintended and inappropriate. Perhaps..." he swallowed, "perhaps you ought to go now. I'm sorry."

Hurt by his formal tone, Lily stood and nodded, trying to keep the tears from falling. "I hope you're all right, Sev. If you really want me to leave, I will. Have I done something wrong?" she asked.

"No... not your fault," he ground out. He softened, saying, "I'm just worn out. Thank you for coming. I'll- I'll see you later, okay?"

Lily nodded again, forcing back the tears. "All right," she replied shakily. "Good night, Sev."

Feeling both afraid and wanting nothing more than to reach out to him, Lily embraced her Gryffindor courage and leaned over, kissing him on the lips. Severus weakly returned the affectionate gesture and watched as she left in silence.

Not too much later, Madam Pomfrey returned. "Good, I'm glad to see you're still where I left you," she remarked. "How are you feeling?"

"Physically, better," Severus said, not meeting her eyes.

Madam Pomfrey sat in the same seat Lily had occupied earlier. "Is something wrong, dear?"

Sighing, Severus said, "It's... really complicated."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't know how much I really can talk about it," he admitted, for that much was true. Severus's haunting thoughts about his old life weren't something he could openly reveal to anyone. If Lily had thought him crazy moments ago, telling Madam Pomfrey about his former life would really make him look crazy.

"I gave the headmaster a good talking to," Madam Pomfrey remarked, smiling. "I still cannot believe he didn't bring you here immediately. I'm glad those boys are getting their just rewards, especially Mr. Mulciber. Really, the very idea of using an Unforgivable on another student, or anyone for that matter, is just sickening." Madam Pomfrey sounded downright insulted.

"And you- you don't think I'm like those boys?" Severus asked in a quiet voice. He wasn't sure why he was opening up like this to the matron, but her demeanor was inviting and understanding. Severus had spoken with her many times as an adult. She didn't judge like so many others.

"What?" Madam Pomfrey gasped. "Dear heavens, no, child! The amount of times I've seen you in here, I knew you were never like those awful boys."

"But you know my interest in the Dark Arts... why Potter and Black feel it all right to victimize me."

"That's not reason enough, Severus, to harm another person. I know you're an intelligent, well-read, powerful wizard, and frankly, I think your interests in the Dark Arts are more out of curiosity to learn more and to also protect yourself."

That was spot on. It almost scared Severus how right she was. "How-how did you know?" he questioned, thinking of the times when he had only been a child and reading old books from the Prince family that lined the shelves in his house. He had wanted only to protect his mother and himself from his drunken father. Then, at Hogwarts, Severus finally thought he would be accepted, for he would be around others like himself. The need to prove himself from a young age had been vital to him.

"It's not so much a matter of knowing as just feeling," Madam Pomfrey explained. "You're an introspective boy, usually alone, and you might try to fool everybody into thinking you really don't care, but no one has that many walls around him, Severus, unless he's scared and hiding. You have never once fooled me with all your tough words and biting mannerisms. You're so young yet. No one your age should have to endure that kind of life, child."

Blinking at the frankness and sincerity of her words, Severus was rendered speechless for a while. If only she knew that he wasn't quite as young as she thought... what would she think if he were an adult? He already knew the answer to that question. Regardless of his age before, Madam Pomfrey had not only tended to his physical wounds, but she had always been a calming presence in his unsettled life. She seemed to know exactly what to say, and what made it all the better was that she meant every word.

Severus couldn't disagree with her, but neither did he want to admit how right she was. Instead, he simply nodded. "Thank you, Madam Pomfrey."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Severus was released from the infirmary the following morning. He hadn't slept well that night; whether due to the physical pain from his injuries or from the thoughts that plagued his mind or both, he wasn't sure. Regardless, he wouldn't be seeing Mulciber's ugly mug in the halls of Hogwarts anymore. Dumbledore had come to retrieve him, much to his dismay.

The headmaster had politely asked how he was faring, to which Severus had mumbled a reply, but other than that, no words had passed between the two, besides Dumbledore explaining he would be showing Severus to his new room. Curious, Severus quietly followed the old wizard through the halls. He hoped he wouldn't be sharing a room with any Gryffindors. He wouldn't put it past Dumbledore to do something cruel and unusual.

However, Dumbledore led Severus to what was typically the guest wing and stopped in front of a door.

"This will be your room, Severus, at least for a while. Should things improve between you and your housemates, you may return to your dormitory."

Severus barely looked at Dumbledore as he spoke. Too much resentment, perhaps some of it unfounded, still tainted Severus's heart. He gave a curt nod and entered the room. Dumbledore thankfully left him without another word. Severus closed the door and leaned against the inside of it, exhaling and closing his eyes. Finally, he had some privacy. It was sad that it took getting tortured by his own housemates to make Dumbledore see that Severus was picked on by other students. Unfortunately, Severus knew better than to think Dumbledore would ever equally punish the precious Gryffindors.

Taking in the room, Severus noticed that it was smaller than his old room in the dungeons from when he had been a teacher. He didn't expect anything extraordinary, but this was far better than he had expected. Had Dumbledore taken a small amount of pity on him, then? Examining the room, Severus was pleased. Its decor was simple and muted, and there was a bathroom off it as well. There wasn't a desk to write at, but he didn't suppose a student would have

that privilege. He would still be going to the library to do his homework.

Thankful it was still the weekend, Severus went to the bed and flopped graciously onto it, immediately falling asleep. Today might be Halloween, but he didn't feel the need to attend the festivities. Lily would probably wonder where he was, but too exhausted from the previous day's activities, Severus spent the rest of the day in his room.

The next day, it was back to classes. Severus reluctantly made his presence at breakfast, choosing to sit with the first years, if only to stay away from Avery, Wilkes, and Rosier, who were all taking turns glaring at him. None of them uttered a single word to Severus, and he wondered if their punishment had made any lasting impression.

Probably not, Severus thought sourly to himself as he left the Great Hall for his first class.

Somehow, he made it through the day, only to be greeted by a concerned Lily. Her face held a mixture of anger and worry as she stood in the library where they normally sat together.

"Where were you last night?" she demanded.

"In my new room," Severus replied, feeling guilty for not telling her yesterday and awkward for how they had parted last.

"Your new room?" Lily asked, confused.

"Yes, Dumbledore gave me a room to myself in the guest wing... at least for now. I guess I just wanted to be alone after what happened."

Lily nodded. "I guess I can understand that. I just missed you, Sev. The Halloween feast was excellent. I wish you could have been there."

"I'm sorry," Severus mumbled. "Er... so, do you want to study, then?"

"All right," Lily agreed.

Severus and Lily opened their books, the complacency of school back in place.

For the next several weeks, Severus's life was fairly uneventful. The more time that passed, the more he wondered when the next bad event would happen. Just because Avery and the others had to serve detention every night of the week for the following month and were doing nothing more than glaring at Severus didn't mean they weren't plotting what to do next to him. The Marauders, on the other hand, continued to be a nuisance, especially Potter, but Severus could easily tune out their name calling. He reminded himself of his true age, saying repeatedly that he would *not* resort to acting like an adolescent boy. Classes were fine for the most part, and Severus continued to excel in Potions and Defense. Slughorn tried inviting Severus to another Slug Club gathering, but Severus declined, having no desire to endure the man's boisterous attitude outside of the classroom.

The days grew very cold, and before Severus knew it, winter had arrived. Christmas was mere days away, and he was looking forward to seeing his mother again. Lily and he would be returning home for the holidays, and Severus imagined having the house to himself and inviting Lily over whenever he wanted.

Keeping those thoughts in the forefront of his mind, he counted down the days to that freedom. Finally, the last day of classes came and went, and Severus and Lily boarded the Hogwarts Express, heading home for two weeks of enjoyment.

Author's Note: My apologies for the delay and shortness of this chapter. I've been extremely busy, and I do work a full time job, which has been absolutely crazy lately. I know I can't keep up the pace I previously had been with this story. Real life is simply too demanding. Also, I know this chapter is really short and horribly boring, especially after the last couple of chapters, but I wanted to get something out, and a short transitory chapter was needed to lead to the next part. I'll need a few days to work on the next (much longer) chapter. It will be about Christmas, of course.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The drive back to their neighborhood from the train station was longer than it had been in September, for the December winds brought ice and snow, making the conditions hazardous. By the time Lily and Severus stepped out of the Evans' car, Severus felt the last of his patience dwindling. His legs were cramped from sitting for endless hours, and despite the fact he wasn't particularly looking forward to seeing his home on Spinner's End again, being in his own bed that night was a welcoming thought.

After helping Lily bring her things inside, Severus was standing on the front porch with her. Snow was falling lightly, and the sun was already low in the sky.

"I guess I should be heading home now," Severus said.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Lily asked.

Severus smiled slightly. Lily didn't need to ask if her presence was wanted. "If you want," he replied, "but won't your parents expect you for dinner?"

Lily shrugged. "Soon enough, but I already told them I'd be helping you take your things back to your house."

"All right, then," Severus agreed.

Had he been in the confines of his own house, Severus would have used magic to help move the bags, but in the open of a Muggle neighborhood, he knew better. They walked along the side of the road, careful not to slip on the ice. The sidewalks were unfortunately covered with large piles of dirty snow.

Turning a corner, they began walking past the playground where Severus had first observed Lily was a witch. Lily was quietly talking about seeing Petunia back home a few minutes ago when Severus noticed a form lying on one of the benches, shivering violently. A bad feeling pooled in the pit of Severus's stomach as his dark eyes rested upon the homeless man.

Stopping in his tracks, Severus continued to gaze at the form on the bench. Lily, noticing Severus's sudden hesitation, stopped as well and cast him a confused gaze.

"What's wrong, Sev?" she asked softly.

"Can you see him?" he returned just as softly, gesturing slightly with his head toward the man.

Lily followed the direction of the gesture and saw the man's body stretched out on the bench. She nodded.

"I think it might be my father," Severus whispered, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice.

Lily's eyes shifted from the park bench to Severus and back again. "We have to walk past the playground, Sev. I suppose we could walk on the other side of the street."

Resigning himself to that suggestion, Severus and Lily crossed the street and quickened their pace. Regrettably, just as they were making their way past the bench, the man stirred, probably having not been properly asleep, and he sat up. A part of Severus wanted to turn his head and confirm his suspicions, but he kept up his rapid pace, eager to be as far away from the man as possible. The man, however, was now standing and ambling his way drunkenly across the slushy road toward the two teenagers.

Severus noticed and stopped, murmuring to Lily, "Get behind me." He reached for his wand.

"What are you doing?" Lily hissed in his ear. "Sev, this is stupid. Let's just get out of here."

"And have him follow us?" Severus hissed back. "I don't think so."

When the man was five feet away, Severus could clearly see that it was Tobias Snape. Tobias had never been an attractive man, but looking at him now, Severus found every inch of him deplorable. Tobias's dark brown hair was hanging wildly about his face, matted and filthy. He hadn't shaven since Severus had expelled him from

Spinner's End, and so a beard, ragged and just as filthy as his hair, framed his jaw. Severus tried not to breathe, as Tobias reeked of stale alcohol and general body odor. He noticed that man was wearing the same clothes he had been months ago, only they were darkened with months of grime and tattered and torn. It was no wonder Tobias was shivering in the cold - he had no winter coat!

"Severus," Tobias slurred, his bloodshot eyes displaying recognition. "Please... my boy, won't you let me come home? I've tried to find home, and it's missing..."

"Get away, Father," Severus ground out. "You're no longer welcome there."

For a moment, Severus locked eyes with Tobias. Even now, he was still drinking, and Severus knew the man wouldn't change. At least if Tobias were sober, what Severus said might sink in the smallest bit, but Severus had long ago given up hope for his father. The man destroyed himself and everyone around him.

Tobias glanced past Severus and seeing Lily, smiled. "Who's the pretty lady?" he asked.

"None of your business," Severus said sternly. "Now, go back to your bench and leave us alone."

"Having a bit of fun with your lady friend?" Tobias groused. "Can't I have a go with her?"

Insulted, Severus brought his wand out, forcing it between Tobias's eyes. "You will *never* talk about Lily that way, ever," Severus said menacingly. "You have lost all respect. You have chosen your path, Father, so this is the life you will lead - alone and damned by your own pathetic choices."

I would know what that feels like, Severus couldn't help but add in his mind to himself.

Suddenly, Tobias's pleading face turned harsh. His temper broke, and he raged, "You've taken everything from me, boy! You think you

can take my wife, my home, my- my identity away from me! You'll get yours, you'll see."

As much as Severus wanted to use magic and blast Tobias, he knew it would be tracked in an open Muggle neighborhood. He didn't have the advantage of being inside his own house right now. He chose instead to punch Tobias in the nose, and when the older man was cursing and covering his bleeding nose a second later, cowering back, Severus took the opportunity to leave.

"Go," Severus hissed to Lily.

They took off at a run down the street, putting as much distance between them and Tobias as quickly as possible. Finally, reaching Spinner's End, Severus unlocked and unwarded the back door and slipped inside, Lily next to him the whole way. Once they were safely inside, Severus heaved a sigh of relief and dropped his bags.

Taking Lily's hand, he silently led her to the living room, where they dropped onto the couch. The electricity was no longer working, so Severus lazily aimed his wand at the fireplace and started a fire in the grate, both for light and heat. Noticing the TV, Severus was reminded of all the years Tobias had lain on this same couch they now occupied, the television blaring in the background.

"I need to dispose of that abominable thing," Severus remarked, glaring at the TV.

Lily, concerned, knew Severus was trying to withdraw attention from the earlier encounter with his father. "It's okay to talk about it if you want... about him," Lily murmured, squeezing his hand reassuringly.

Lily had never properly met Tobias before today. She had only seen him from a distance or heard about him from Severus. While she was put off by the man's general demeanor and appearance, Tobias's remarks about her, which should have abased her, hadn't done so. The prime emotion she had felt upon seeing the sorry man was pity.

"There's nothing to talk about, Lily," Severus muttered, looking into the fire.

Lily watched him for a few seconds. The shadows from the flickering flames danced across his face, illumined in a soft, orange glow. In the dark depths of his eyes, Lily regarded, entranced, the mirrored fire there. So much anger, so much hatred, so much a need to prove himself. Lily felt those emotions rolling off Severus like smoke, even if he tried to keep them snuffed.

"There's much to talk about, Sev," Lily finally gently countered, "but maybe another day. It's late, and I know it's been not only a long day, but the last few months have been taxing for you as well. You do know that you don't have to change yourself for me, right?"

Tearing his gaze away from the fire, Severus looked into her eyes. That green - so accepting, so forgiving, so loving... Where had Lily's words of concern come from? He knew she worried about him, and supposing his rage toward and about his father was giving Lily fuel for her concerns, Severus sighed and forced a small smile.

"I do know that, finally," Severus admitted. "But you're right. It *has* been a long day. I'll walk you back home, but we're going the long way around this time."

Lily readily agreed, and they left Spinner's End. A couple of hours later, after giving in to sharing dinner with Lily's family, Severus returned home. He debated about which way to take, and deciding the cold wasn't reason enough to take the shorter route past the park, Severus returned the way they had come.

Some time later, Severus was back in the sitting room, staring into the flames like before. The hour was very late, and he wasn't sure why he was moved to do it exactly, but Severus took a blanket from his parents' old bedroom and went outside with it. Finding Tobias's form shivering on the bench, Severus warily approached, hoping the other man was asleep. Tobias thankfully didn't move as Severus came closer and closer. Gingerly, Severus placed the blanket over his father. Tobias's shivers lessened and then stopped. He didn't stir.

Severus stepped away, keeping his eyes locked on his father. The snow began to fall lightly once again. The reds and greens of Christmas lights from nearby houses dimly illuminated the night, as did the soft glow from the streetlights. All was calm and quiet.

His breathing steady, Severus felt a warmth penetrating his heart. Some might say it was the feeling of the season, but it was more than that.

Lily... dear, sweet Lily.

Severus knew why he felt different. The warmth of a blanket on an abusive, lost, pathetic, undeserving man and the warmth in the heart of a cold, embittered, equally lost, once-dead man were one and the same.

Lily's greatest power. Love.

Author's Note: Yes, I know I promised a long chapter. Well, this was twice as long as chapter 22. I originally intended it to be longer, to encompass more of the Christmas season, and have the encounter with Tobias only be the first part, but it developed into something longer, and I liked ending it on this note, leading us to the next chapter, the full on Christmas one.

I apologize for the delay in between updates lately. I literally had to take a day off work to complete this. I needed a break, seriously! Thank God for personal days. Whew!

As for Tobias's character, I wanted there to be some compassion for the man. I don't intend to make him out to be an absolute bully. You'll see.

Chapter Twenty-Four

On Christmas Eve, Severus took the public bus to St. Katherine's to visit his mother. As he stepped off the bus onto the sidewalk, he took in the building before him. Nothing had changed, except the season, since the last time he had come here. Pulling his coat tighter around himself, Severus walked up the sidewalk leading to the main entrance, the chill of the wind biting. It was with relief that he entered the warm building, thankful for the heat and welcoming interior.

The waiting area was decorated with a Christmas tree and a few small bits here and there. He approached the lady at the reception desk, who were wearing a ridiculous Father Christmas hat, her frosty, grizzled hair sticking out underneath.

"Happy Christmas, young man," she politely greeted him, with an abnormally wide smile. "May I help you?"

What a pointless question, Severus snidely thought. "Yes," he said aloud. "I'm here to visit my mother, Eileen Snape."

"Ah," she replied. "I'll let them know you're here. It will be just a few moments. One of the caretakers will need to assist you."

Frowning, Severus crossed his arms over his chest and gave a curt nod, continuing to stand there. The receptionist stood and walked away toward the back. A minute later, she returned, saying, "Roger will be with you shortly."

"Thank you," Severus murmured, standing in the same spot.

The receptionist's previously forced smile diminished as she looked warily at him. "Er... you may take a seat, young man," she pointed out, thinking him a moody teenager.

Not accustomed to being spoken to in such a manner, Severus had to stop himself from snapping back. He strode away and sank into one of the chairs. He hadn't seen his mother in four months, damn it! Why did they have to make him wait a moment longer?

The five minutes that followed could have been five hours to Severus. He kept glancing at the clock, watching the second hand moving excruciatingly slowly around the dial. Finally, a man opened the door to the waiting room and called, "Severus Snape!"

Severus stood and approached him. "Hello," the man said with a withering smile. "I'm Roger. I'm here to escort you to your mother."

"Wonderful," Severus remarked dryly. He didn't feel it necessary to introduce himself, as this Roger bloke already knew his name and would probably promptly forget it afterward.

Roger didn't seem offended, but simply led Severus to Eileen's room. Upon arrival, Roger said, "Enjoy your visit, Mr. Snape. Should you need us, just press the button near the door."

Glad to be rid of the man, Severus entered the room and found his mother sitting in a chair, reading to herself. Eileen looked good. She was dressed in Muggle clothes, of course, and her hair was pulled back into a ponytail at the base of her neck instead of left to hang in her face like usual.

"Mum," Severus said, trying to keep his voice even.

Eileen's eyes left the book, and she gazed into her son's face. She slowly lowered the book as a smile alighted her lips. "Severus!" she exclaimed, standing, the book completely forgotten as she placed it on the table next to the chair.

Eileen crossed the room in five large strides, almost running, and embraced her son. Severus returned the embrace, grateful for such a pleasant reception.

"I've missed you," Eileen said into his shoulder. Severus could tell she was crying.

"I've missed you, too, Mum," replied Severus, trying not to become too emotional himself. "But don't cry, Mum. I'm here now, and I see you're doing quite well."

After a little while, mother and son released each other. Eileen went back to her chair, and Severus took to sitting on the bed, as there was no other seat available.

"You look well," he observed. "And you sound well."

"They are pretty good... for Muggles," Eileen said. "I think I could come home soon, Severus." Eileen smiled slightly. "From what they've told me, I've made good progress, and I do miss being home. I've missed you terribly and Tobias... have you seen him, Severus? How is he?"

Severus tried not to frown too deeply upon hearing his father's name. Eileen seemed responsive and alert, but if she was asking about Tobias as if nothing had happened, that wasn't promising. "Father is... no longer at home, Mum," he said carefully. "You know that."

"He hasn't returned, then?" Eileen pressed, her eyes pleading and a crease of worry appearing between her eyebrows.

"You know what happened," Severus tried to explain calmly. "He hasn't been allowed to come back."

"What- what do you mean, Severus?" Her tone sounded accusing.

"Have you forgotten, Mother?" Severus asked, his voice suddenly much harder. "Have you truly not remembered he is the reason you're here? How he spoke to you, how he hit you, the nights he didn't return home, all the empty bottles of alcohol strewn about the floor...?"

Eileen cowered in the chair, curling up into a ball, hiding her face. "N-no, no, no," she whimpered.

Severus was instantly ashamed of having reacted so harshly. He wasn't sure if she was saying no to his questions, acknowledging he was right after all, or if she was merely shrinking back from his brash demeanor.

"Mum," Severus said softly, leaving the bed and coming closer, kneeling directly in front of her. "Mum, look at me," he implored.

Severus mentally berated himself for upsetting his mother, hoping someone wouldn't overhear the commotion and come into the room, demanding an explanation for the disturbance.

Eileen withdrew her face from her hands and regarded her son. While her eyes were red and her cheeks were stained with the trails of tears, she looked Severus bravely in the eyes. Thankfully, she hadn't called him Tobias like the last time he had upset her.

"Severus," she murmured. "You... you don't hate me, do you?"

Of all the words he was expecting, Severus wasn't prepared for this question. "Hate you?" he asked, aghast. "Mum, why would you ask such a thing?"

"Because... because I couldn't be a better mother to you," Eileen murmured ashamedly.

"Don't be ridiculous," Severus replied gently, taking her hand. "It's not your fault. Besides, you did what you could, in spite of everything. I... didn't exactly make things easier for you," he said guiltily.

"That's not true, Severus," Eileen countered gingerly. "You helped me."

Unable to look into her eyes a moment longer, Severus turned his gaze to the floor instead. "Not until recently," he muttered.

Severus had wanted today's visit to be a happy one, but instead he was hurting his mother and dwelling on depressing memories, things which couldn't be altered. What had been would always remain, but as Severus's gaze travelled to the window and watched the softly falling snow, he knew he had been given a chance to relive his life, a chance he ought not to waste. The spirit of Christmas, which lifted the hearts of many, had more often than not evaded Severus, but recalling his simple act of kindness toward his undeserving father a few nights ago, Severus thought for the first time that he might enjoy the holiday. Something inside him was in the process of shifting. His seemingly immovable, stubborn walls were shattering stone by stone, plank by plank. This would have frightened him, angered him, and only reinforced his need to build more, sturdier walls in the past. Now,

however, he found he didn't mind so much. He could bear to be vulnerable around certain people. Lily and his mother. And so, Severus willed himself to meet her gaze again.

"Regardless," Eileen murmured. "It doesn't matter. So, Severus," she said suddenly, "how has school been? You haven't exactly been open in your letters."

"I can't afford to be too open, Mum," Severus explained, smirking a little. "What would the Muggles here think if they read it?"

Eileen laughed. "True enough. The Muggles are pleasant enough, although it is difficult not to mention magic. They pretty much leave me alone, which is the way I like it."

Severus nodded. He knew his mother was a creature of solitude, and she preferred that lifestyle. He had inherited that same desire. Other people were usually too bothersome to deal with. Like Eileen, Severus had little tolerance for stupidity, ignorance, wrecklessness, and the like.

Hoping to continue along this vein, Severus inquired further about her stay at St. Katherine's. They spoke for a while about some of the other patients and the treatment Eileen was receiving, but then a lull happened, and Eileen, her sharpness returning, posed the question about school again.

Sighing, Severus gave in. "If you insist, Mother," he muttered. "The other students are the same, and I choose not to spend much time around them. Lily and I are closer. Classes are fine. I'm excelling at Potions and Defense, as you know."

Refusing to speak of his encounter with his housemates and the Marauders' constant badgering and pranks, Severus kept his voice calm. He wouldn't give his mother reason to worry about him. What good would it do her when her sole concern ought to be her own welfare and recovery? Besides, Severus reckoned, he was a grown wizard.

"Ah, yes, Lily Evans, that young girl you're so fond of," Eileen said. "I'm surprised you didn't bring her with you today."

"I just wanted to spend time with you, Mum. I'll be stopping by again in a couple of days and can bring Lily if you like."

"That's up to you, Severus. I would hate to bore the poor girl."

"Lily wouldn't be bored," Severus protested.

Unable to help herself, Eileen's lips quirked a little. Just then, there was a knock from the door, and it opened. Roger was standing there, peeking his head into the room.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but visiting hours are over."

Severus scowled at the insufferable man. He hadn't seen his mother in months, and after a couple of hours, he was being told he had to leave?

"I wasn't aware my time with my mother should be limited by your rules," Severus said stiffly, standing. "Why must I leave? What good reason do you have, sir?"

Affronted by what he perceived as an adolescent boy, Roger replied with a hint of impatience in his voice, "Those are the rules, young man. I am sorry," he said, not sounding sorry at all, "but you must say goodbye."

"Very well," Severus snapped. He pointedly ignored the man and gave his mother a parting hug. "Happy Christmas, Mum," he whispered into her ear. "I'll see you soon, I promise."

"Happy Christmas, my dear Severus," Eileen returned, her voice breaking again.

Not trusting himself to speak without heavy emotion in his own voice, Severus released her and headed for the door, not looking back. He couldn't. He could feel his mother's sad eyes watching his retreating form with every step he took. Severus didn't spare Roger a slight glance, but walked alongside the man to the waiting room and left the facility without another word.

The ride on the bus home was subdued. As much as he had enjoyed seeing his mother again, Severus couldn't help but wish more than anything that she could come back home.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Christmas Eve night, Lily had come over to Spinner's End and spent the rest of the evening with Severus. After the visit with his mother being cut short, he wasn't in the best of moods, but Lily's presence helped, and he was glad to have her with him. Just before she left, she invited Severus over her house for Christmas dinner.

"Are you sure?" Severus asked, unsure.

"Of course," Lily replied. "My parents told me to tell you. As for Petunia, she will just have to deal with it." She smiled.

Smirking, Severus said, "Well, then I guess I'll have to be there, if only to see the look on Petunia's long face."

"Sev," Lily said seriously, "that's unkind to make fun of her. She's still my sister."

Realizing Petunia was still a sore subject between them, Severus didn't say another word against Lily's sister... for now. He inwardly sighed, wondering how Lily could still defend her after all these years, but then again, she defended him, didn't she? It was Lily's nature to show compassion where others failed.

"All right," Severus gave in with a small nod. "Until tomorrow, then?"

At that moment, the clock struck midnight. "Make that later today," Lily corrected wryly.

Having not realized the time, Severus gasped. "You need to get going home, Lily, but you're not going alone. Come on, I'll walk you home."

They bundled up and stepped out into the chilling winter air, purposefully taking the long route. Ever since the confrontation with Tobias a few days prior, Severus had avoided walking past the park.

It was a placid night. The stars were bright against the velvety backdrop of the night sky, and the moonlight glistened beautifully off

the freshly fallen snow. Not a sound could be heard. The world, it seemed, was truly at peace.. if only for tonight.

As they walked along, Severus's mind drifted to his past life. This would be his first Christmas in this new life, and he had hope that it would be better than any before. Hope was a strange feeling to him, but it wasn't so foreign anymore. Only six months in, he was changing for the better. He couldn't imagine joining Voldemort now or ever. In fact, it was hard to imagine the likes of Voldemort even existing when all around appeared so calm and good.

Eventually, they arrived at Lily's house. Their point of departure was the front porch like it always was. Severus gazed down into Lily's eyes, transfixed, seeing his own reflection staring back at him. Lily was doing likewise. They both felt a connectedness in that moment, locked just for them.

"Happy Christmas, Sev," Lily murmured.

"Happy Christmas, Lily," Severus returned just as softly.

Leaning down, he placed a gentle kiss on her lips. Severus parted and left, knowing he would see Lily again in a few short hours.

He decided to take his chances and go past the park. Surely Tobias, if he was hanging around there, would be asleep by now. As Severus approached the area where the playground was, he didn't see anyone. Releasing a sigh of relief, his warm breath heaved into the cold air, Severus quickened his pace. He was almost past the park when he noticed a movement out of the corner of his eye. He reached instinctively for his wand.

Sure enough, Tobias's drunken voice came. "Sev'rus, is that you?"

Ignore him. Keep walking.

"Sev'rus, wait!" Tobias pathetically pleaded. "Pl- please..."

Against his better judgment, Severus stopped and turned to face his father. Tobias was only a few feet away, for he had been trailing Severus for the past several paces.

"What do you want, Father?" Severus asked impatiently.

"Show me the way home," Tobias said. "That's where you're headed, right?"

"Don't follow me, or I'll be forced to harm you, Father," Severus ground out. "How many times must I tell you that you aren't welcome there. Go get help, clean yourself up, sober up... and maybe I'll talk to you again."

Tobias, an utterly helpless look in his eyes, begged, "But I don't know where to go, what to do, how- how I'm supposed to change."

"You know what you need to do. I just told you. The question is - Do you even want to change, Father?"

Tobias didn't say anything for a while, but then he nodded.

"Then do what you must, whatever that may be," Severus sighed. "Now, go back to your bench and leave me be."

Surprisingly, Tobias listened. Severus, glad he didn't have to punch the other man in the nose again, hurried away, wondering if Tobias really was trying to change for the better. Finally entering his house, Severus glanced out the window to ensure his father hadn't followed him, and he set the wards and locked the door.

Soon after that, Severus found himself in bed, wondering what his father was playing at... or if he was serious. Severus never imagined his father sobering and taking responsibility for his past wrongs, but again, Severus had tried to right his wrongs. Why couldn't Tobias do the same?

Eventually, Severus fell asleep and awoke several hours later in the early part of the morning. Since the days were at their shortest, the sun was just rising as he left the bed and headed down the hallway to take a shower. Severus quickly cleaned and dressed, then headed downstairs to the kitchen to eat breakfast.

As he sat at the table, he felt very alone all of a sudden. Severus was used to being alone, and with the exception of Lily's occasional

company since returning home for the holidays, Severus had been by himself in the cold house. He hadn't bothered with any sort of decorating, as that wasn't his thing, and no one else would be there to appreciate it.

After a simple meal of tea and toast, Severus tidied up the kitchen and went into the sitting room. He pulled Lily's gift out of his pocket, hoping it would prove sufficient. He didn't recall ever really exchanging gifts with Lily in his past life, but this year would be different. Severus examined the necklace, a simple silver chain with a pendant holding a small ruby. It had belonged to his mother. Severus had deliberated whether or not he should take it from Eileen, as it wasn't as if she was dead, nor had he gotten Eileen's permission to give it away. Severus, however, figured his mother wouldn't miss it. She hadn't worn it in years, and sadly, Severus didn't think she would again. He didn't have the money to buy anything nice for Lily, and so, it was this or nothing.

Severus momentarily wondered if he ought to wrap the necklace, but he didn't have any paper, and he figured it would be fine without frilly ribbons and bows. Lily wasn't the type of girl who needed extravagance, nor did she want it.

Dinner at the Evans' was still hours away. Sighing, Severus glanced out the window, noticing that it was snowing again. There had been more snow than usual this year, he observed. He couldn't remember if that had been the case before. Withdrawing from the window, Severus went to the bookshelves and grazed for something to read to pass the time. He came upon old family photo albums, his hand stopping at them. Unsure if it was the best idea, Severus removed the first one and took it back to the couch and sat down again.

As he opened the album, the moving pictures told a story from another lifetime, literally. Severus was only a baby, although almost a year old, during his first Christmas. He barely recognized the happy, pink child. Tobias was smiling, watching as Eileen laughed as she played with her son. Severus turned the page, unable to watch a scene he knew would never come to pass again. Page after page told the story of his life as he remembered it all too well. As Severus grew older, his parents grew apart. Less happiness was seen in those

pictures, and by the time he reached the end of the album, sometime around his seventh or eighth Christmas, Tobias was clutching a bottle and sitting moodily in the background, frowning at the little boy who was dressed in mismatched clothes and whose hair was uneven and quite long. Eileen was off to the side, half-heartedly smiling at little Severus, who was trying to play with a broom.

Severus closed the album and returned it to its place on the shelf, having no desire to take the next one. He knew what would follow would only grow more depressing, and he was determined this Christmas would be happier. If that was the case, he wondered why he was taking a depressing trip down memory lane. Could he simply not be happy?

Stifling a yawn, Severus stretched out on the couch and fell asleep, bored with the morning. When he woke, he briefly panicked, wondering if he had overslept. One glance at the clock told him he was safe. Dinner would be in an hour. Figuring it would be fine to head over to Lily's house now, Severus stood and put on his coat and headed out into the cold.

Because the extreme bite in the air, Severus decided to walk past the park, hoping his father wouldn't be there. There was no sign of the man when Severus quickly strolled by, and he momentarily wondered where Tobias went. He hoped to a homeless shelter. Even a lowlife like Tobias ought to have a warm meal on Christmas Day.

When Severus arrived at Lily's house, he was absolutely freezing. Tired of not being able to use magic outside of school or his home, Severus was glad his birthday was only a couple of weeks away. He rang the bell, and within a couple of seconds, he could hear steps bounding toward the door. Lily opened the door and beamed at him, nearly pulling him into the house. She wasted no time in throwing her arms around him, burying her face in the thick layers of his clothes.

"Thank you for coming, Sev," she breathed. "I'm so happy you're here!"

"Wow, Lily, let me breathe," he joked, returning the hug.

Lily released her hold on him long enough for him to remove his coat, and Lily excitedly reached for his hand, leading him toward the sitting room. A large, handsome evergreen tree graced one corner of the cozy room, and a fire crackled in the grate. Mrs. Evans welcomed Severus and offered him something to drink, shortly followed by Mr. Evans as he shook his hand. Only Petunia remained seated, occasionally glowering at Severus and Lily.

They sat down, and Severus began experiencing a typical family holiday. Mrs. Evans seemed a bit too much like Molly Weasley in how she doted almost constantly over her children and Severus, almost as if he were a third offspring. It took some getting used to on Severus's part, but after a few minutes, he grew comfortable enough. Besides, with Lily at his side, he was more at ease.

Dinner was an overly elaborate affair. Lily smiled, whispering apologetically into Severus's ear, "Sorry, Mum does tend to go a bit overboard. She's really gone all out this year. When she heard you accepted the invitation, I think she added at least two dishes to the menu."

Severus balked at the feast, unable to comprehend how Mrs. Evans thought five people could consume what could easily have fed four times as many people. The meal was soon underway, Mrs. Evans explaining that growing boys needed their nourishment. Severus simply nodded politely.

Afterward, they retired to the sitting room again, and the opening of presents began. When Lily's parents presented Severus with a gift, he said uneasily, "It's not necessary of you. Thoughtful, but not necessary. I don't have anything to give you."

"Nonsense, my boy," Mrs. Evans said kindly. "Having to be all by yourself in that house, and after what you've been through... you deserve a decent Christmas. Open it."

Giving in, Severus complied, if only to calm the nervously excited woman. It was a sweater. Severus thanked them, thinking he would never wear the awful thing. He hated sweaters.

Neither Lily nor Severus exchanged gifts in front of the others. Severus kept waiting for the right moment, but there was constant movement and talking all around, and as the afternoon progressed, he began to become nervous. What if Lily hated his gift? What if she outrightly refused to accept it, for whatever reason?

Petunia, tired of spending time with her family, went up to her room to sulk, and Lily's parents went into the kitchen. Now was the moment. Severus reached into his pocket when Lily had her head turned and pulled out the necklace, keeping it clutched firmly in his hand.

"Lily?" he asked, his voice cracking like a young teenager.

"Yes, Sev?" Lily replied, giving him a confused look.

"Er... happy Christmas." He shoved the necklace into her hands without preamble, blushing.

Surprised, Lily looked down at her hands, curious what Severus had given her so forcefully. When her eyes came to rest upon the necklace, they grew large. "Sev," she breathed, "what? You didn't have to... Is this for me?" she asked in awe.

"Yes," Severus said softly. "I wanted to give you something this year. I mean, I hope it's okay-"

He was stopped from going any further because Lily was kissing him full on the lips. Momentarily shocked, Severus soon recovered himself and kissed back.

"Thank you, Sev," she said sincerely, truly touched. "I actually have something for you as well."

Lily left and went to the tree, retrieving a small package and handing it to him. Severus tried to protest, but Lily only gave him a half-hearted glare.

"What? You can give me something, but I can't get you something? You even accepted that sweater from my mum."

"All right, all right," Severus relented. "It's just... I'm not used to this whole gift thing." He ripped away the wrapping and found a book about the history of defensive magic from around the world.

"I know it's not much," Lily started to say quickly, "but I know you like to read, and since you're so good at Defense-"

"It's great, Lily; thank you," Severus gently cut her off, knowing she would ramble otherwise. When Lily didn't appear convinced, Severus said, "Really, I love it."

Severus thought it a practical gift. He was always interested in learning more, and Lily had obviously put thought into what she gave him.

"Do you want to go up to my room?" Lily suddenly posed. "I'd love some alone time with you. As much as I love my parents, it's tiring spending the entire day with them, don't you think?"

"Er..." Severus started to say, thinking Lily's parents would object to her taking an adolescent boy up to her bedroom.

"They won't mind; come on." Lily seemed suddenly quite anxious to be alone with him, and not wanting to argue, Severus complied and followed Lily up the stairs and into her room.

"Thanks again for coming over," Lily said, closing the door. She took Severus by the hands and led him to the bed.

"Sure," Severus said, trying hard not to stutter. There was a look in Lily's eyes that wasn't usually there.

"It's been a wonderful Christmas," she said, smiling and sitting next to him. "Now, let's just... kiss a little."

Severus gladly agreed, although he kept wondering when her parents would come knocking at the door, demanding they return downstairs. Although he had dreamed of being with Lily romantically for years, he had always imagined it being somewhere private. Lily was only sixteen, and Severus couldn't help but feeling like he was violating her.

After a few minutes of heavily making out, Severus said, "Lily, not that I'm not enjoying this, but can't we just talk?" He felt hot and bothered... and very awkward. He had never made out with a girl like this in his life. Ever.

Lily looked hurt, and Severus immediately regretted his words. "Not that I wasn't enjoying it, Lily, but your parents are downstairs, and... and I don't want to get carried away. You're- er, we're so young yet."

Lily nodded. "You're right. I'm sorry. Hormones," she said, trying to lighten the mood.

"One day, I promise," Severus said seriously. "Just not yet. It needs to be the right time." *Like when you're married to me*, he thought hopefully.

Just then, Mrs. Evans's voice called from downstairs, saying dessert was ready. Severus and Lily straightened their clothes and headed back downstairs. Surprisingly, no questions were asked, and Severus wondered if Lily's parents were more liberal than average. By the time they were finished with dessert, it was quite late. Knowing Lily would need to stay with her family for the rest of the day, Severus allowed her to see him to the door. He thanked the Evanses for their kindness and hospitality before saying goodbye to Lily.

"Today was good," he said levelly, wishing he could have had Lily entirely to himself, but glad nonetheless to have been in her company with others around.

"It was," Lily agreed, wishing the same as Severus. In time, perhaps their wish would come true.

With one last parting kiss, Severus wished Lily a happy Christmas and stepped into the cold once again, only he was warmer than he had been before coming to spend the day with Lily.

Author's Note: I'm sorry for the long delay with updating. Work and everything else has been absolutely crazy, and I've had this chapter in my mind all week, just waiting to get the chance to sit down and write it. Finally! I can't guarantee updates as quickly as they used to be, at least not for a while yet. I don't foresee things getting any less

hectic and busy in real life. I hope you enjoyed this chapter and that the wait was worth it.

Oh, and I also wrote a poem about Lily and Severus:

Green-Black

There are slight moments when

Green turns to black,

In a need of soul-searching

And gazing within for lost pieces,

Memories drained with the loss of blood,

Tiny holes leaving their imprints.

Blinking once more and at last

The rattling breath escapes,

And then it's only a relief and release.

Somehow, victory is known and believed

With the encompassing to two welcoming arms.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Christmas Day was almost over. After Severus had gone home, Lily helped her parents clean up the kitchen and sitting room, as empty plates and shreds of wrapping paper were a happy reminder of the pleasantries of the day. Lily couldn't help but wonder why Severus had been so hesitant to spend more time alone with her in her bedroom. Was the excuse that her parents were close really all there was to it? Also, Lily frowned to herself, unable to understand why Petunia hadn't come down from her room since several hours earlier. She knew Severus and Petunia had never gotten along, but still, Petunia was her sister, and as Lily's relationship had grown with Severus these past few months, she now realized what little she had left with Petunia was dwindling and dying. Her thoughts were interrupted when her mother spoke, however.

"Well, that was certainly a nice Christmas, wasn't it?" Mrs. Evans asked, pushing her red hair out of her green eyes.

Lily looked at her mother as she spoke. She had inherited many of her features from her mother, although Mrs. Evans was wider in the hips and a good twenty-five years older than her daughter. Smiling slightly, Lily replied, "Yeah, it was. Thanks for inviting Severus over, Mum. I think he appreciated having someone to spend the holiday with."

"Of course," Mrs. Evans replied, in the middle a scrubbing the dishes. "Would you hand me that bowl, please, dear? Thank you. Anyway, I'm glad he came. Severus really seems like a good boy, even though he wasn't always as friendly as he's been recently... not that I blame him, the poor boy. With growing up in a home like that..." she trailed off, shaking her head sadly.

Lily just nodded, not really intent on discussing the details of Severus's home life. What little she had told her parents was all she felt comfortable revealing, and she knew Severus wouldn't like it if she went telling her parents too much information. He was a deeply private person, and even with him slowly warming to her family, Lily knew he could just as easily recoil if one of her parents said the wrong thing next time they saw him, good intentions or not.

When Lily was finished helping her parents, she headed upstairs. At first, she was planning on heading directly to her room, as she was feeling tired and the thought of her bed was welcoming, but as she walked past Petunia's door, she paused. She leaned against the door, listening for any sign of movement. Had her sister already gone to bed? Lily heard a rustling sound, which might have been the bedcovers moving, but Lily proceeded to knock softly on the door anyway.

"Who is it?" Petunia's moody voice asked a second later.

"Tuney, it's me, Lily."

"What do you want?" came Petunia's voice again, sounding more irritated.

"Can we just... talk?" Lily asked hesitantly.

"Why would I want to talk to you?" Petunia sneered. Lily heard footsteps, and the door opened a fraction, Petunia's face glaring out from the narrow opening. "Well?" she demanded.

"Tuney-"

"Oh, stop with that ridiculous nickname, Lily. We're not children anymore... although, maybe you are, what with still hanging around that dirty Snape boy you've been latched at the hip to ever since you were nine and going to that freakish school to learn card tricks."

Lily reddened a little with indignation. Still, Petunia was her sister. "All right, *Petunia*," she said pointedly. "Let's talk reasonably, like adults, all right? For your information, I'm nearly of age in the wizarding world. I'll be seventeen next month, and then I'll be an adult."

"What's your point, Lily?" huffed Petunia impatiently. "You know I don't care a whit about that crazy world you live in."

"Oh, but I think you do," Lily countered. "You've been jealous ever since you knew I could do magic and you couldn't. You wanted to go to Hogwarts, too. You're just jealous and bitter. Why can't you be happy for me instead of scorning your own sister, Petunia? I've tried

to be kind to you, in spite of your rudeness over the years, and now, I don't see you for months, and when we finally get the chance, you hide up in your room."

"Don't you dare blame me," Petunia hissed, the door opening farther. "Why would I want to spend any time around you, especially when you've made it plainly clear that you would rather be with that Snape boy? You're always with him nowadays. He bloody had to be part of our family Christmas... *our family*, Lily. He's not part of our family. He's treated me horribly since that day in the park."

Balling her fists, Lily turned away, but not before saying, on the verge of tears, "You were my sister, Petunia."

Unable to subject herself to further hurt, Lily went to her room and closed the door, collapsing onto her bed. Why did Petunia have to be so cruel, so bitter? Why was it so difficult for others to see in Severus what she saw? It was true that Severus had been mean to Petunia on many occasions, but how could he be expected to be kind when so few had ever shown him any kindness? Petunia knew as much as her parents about Severus's home life, and it was enough to know that it had been awful. Petunia had been raised by loving parents, given everything she had always wanted... or had she? As Lily thought about the broken relationship between her sister and her, she realized that in making certain choices, something always needed to be sacrificed. Petunia would never admit it, but she did crave to be included in the magical world Lily and Severus shared.

That's hardly my fault, Lily thought. *I can't help being a witch any more than she can help not being one.*

In choosing Severus, Lily knew she had severed her bond with Petunia. She had known it for years, but somehow, maybe foolishly, she had held on to a small shred of hope that Petunia would come around. As Lily lay on her bed that night, she felt she ought not complain, but she couldn't help the feeling of bitterness that was creeping inside. Severus, apparently, wasn't the only one with problems.

x x x x x

Severus spent the following week mostly visiting his mother or with Lily. Eileen certainly seemed to have made progress, and even Dr. Lukvar told Severus as much. While Severus was glad for this, he hoped the facility wouldn't be too hasty in releasing his mother. A premature release would only make matters more complicated, especially with Severus at school.

"Promise me you won't do anything rash," Severus said to his mother on New Year's Eve. "I know you're doing much better, but if you want to come home, at least send me a message before you make a decision."

"Don't worry, Severus," Eileen said for the second time, a slight irritation creeping into her voice.

Severus had noticed that his mother was speaking with more confidence and in her naturally impatient tone lately and with more frequency. A few short months ago, he never imagined she would have made this much progress, although he doubted she would ever make a full recovery.

"All right," Severus sighed. "It's just-"

"Severus, really," Eileen said, smirking much like he was accustomed to doing, "I'm the parent here, not the other way around. I'll be *fine*."

"Well, okay," Severus said doubtfully. He couldn't help adding in his head, *If that were really the case, I wouldn't be the one having to look out for you. Besides, you have no idea that I'm really much older than sixteen.*

When that infernal man, Roger, made his presence known at the door, Severus knew it was time to leave. Reluctantly, he wished his mother farewell and kissed her on the cheek before being ushered out of her room.

x x x x x

The new year came, 1977. Severus and Lily returned to Hogwarts the following day with the rest of the students. School resumed, and in

the following weeks, both Severus and Lily came of age in the wizarding world. Before they knew it, January had passed.

Ever anxious for his sixth year to be finished, Severus mentally counted down the remaining days until the end of June. He endured the continuous pranks of the Marauders and the glares and sneering comments from his housemates, but ever since Mulciber's expulsion, none of Severus's old friends had tried anything on him. He wasn't foolish enough to let his guard down, though, and neither did he think he had seen the end of their cruelty.

Whatever regrets Lily had left regarding the gap between Petunia and herself weren't brought up. She wasn't sure what to feel about the separation. When she was at Hogwarts, she was away from the Muggle world and would easily find herself caught up in her life among witches and wizards.

As their sixth year progressed, schoolwork grew more demanding and time consuming. Severus seriously began to wonder how much longer he could continue to endure forcing himself to attend classes he had already lived through once. In addition to classes, an official from the Ministry started coming to give Apparition lessons to the sixth year students. Severus had to pretend to have difficulty in Apparating initially, as he knew it would be highly suspicious if he got it right on the first try.

The weather began to grow warmer and the daylight longer. Severus was sitting in the chamber he still had to himself, reflecting on the past several weeks, finding that his life was finally on a track he wanted. He felt secure in his relationship with Lily, no longer needing to worry that she might leave him for James Potter. He had the respect of his teachers. His mother was recovering.

Severus should have known, then, that the old saying, "It's too good to be true," would ring true indeed. His pleasant thoughts were interrupted by a summons from the fireplace.

"Severus, please come to my office immediately," came Albus Dumbledore's voice, sounding concerned and rushed.

Author's Note: My apologies, once again, for the delay in getting this updated. I'm evil and left you with a cliffhanger, but I promise to update within the next couple of days. The next few chapters will be exciting (although not in a good way), but they will keep you interested in what's to happen next, I'm sure.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Severus, please come to my office immediately," came Albus Dumbledore's voice, sounding concerned and rushed.

Upon hearing those words, Severus felt his heart clench and drop inside. He had heard that level of panic in Dumbledore's voice on few occasions, very few occasions.

"What is it, sir?" he asked, trying to keep his voice even.

"Please, Severus," the headmaster implored. "Now is not the time to be difficult. Step through the grate and into my office."

Severus frowned in spite of the grave circumstances, whatever they might be. He wasn't *trying* to be difficult, but he wasn't in the mood to argue. So, he complied and went through the fireplace to the headmaster's office. Upon his arrival, Dumbledore said, as kindly as possible, "Do sit down, my boy."

Whatever Dumbledore had to say, starting it with those words never boded well.

"I'm fine standing," Severus replied impatiently, wishing the old man would get to the point.

A sad, troubled look from Dumbledore's normally twinkling eyes met Severus. Severus swallowed in anticipation. Why didn't the old man just bloody say what he needed to say?!

"Severus, I'm terribly sorry, but..." Dumbledore paused, collecting himself, "but I've just been informed that... that your mother is dead."

"No," Severus whispered in pure disbelief. It couldn't be true. It just couldn't be. This had to be some sort of sick joke.

"Severus, please-"

"NO!" Severus roared, balling his fists and clenching his teeth. His eyes were screwed tightly shut, as he could feel the inevitable, mocking sensation of tears starting to form in the corners.

"My dear boy, I know it's hard to believe, to accept, but it's the truth. Severus, please, do sit down." Dumbledore made to move toward the young man, and Severus opened his eyes just in time, stepping away from him as if Dumbledore were diseased.

"Don't!" Severus bellowed, sounding like a wounded animal. "She was-" he tried to say. "N- no, no, she was getting... better." Severus stopped trying to speak, as he was choking on every word with severe distraught emotion. He could no longer contain himself. The face of a seventeen-year-old boy glared back at Dumbledore with enough pain worth two long lifetimes, every injustice, every hurt, every raw and bitter emotion on display. Severus's eyes were red and puffy, and his normally pale face was suffused in blotches of crimson, with the telltale trails of tears crossing the terrain like deep rivers.

Dumbledore left Severus to his misery, and he began to calmly explain the circumstances. "After I found out your mother was being taken care of by Muggles, Severus, I made arrangements for her to be monitored. While I understand your reasons for choosing to take her to a Muggle facility, the wizarding world must still be made aware of a witch or a wizard who is in such a position, simply for the safety of all involved. Your mother was apparently making good progress and was released a week ago. She returned home, and everything seemed to be all right... until this morning."

Severus, who had been pacing in his anguish and remorse, stopped. "How- ?" He shook his head. "She was supposed to write to me! I told her not to leave without letting me know, and of course those idiot bastard Muggles didn't think to notify her bloody *son* that she had left! How... how did she do it?" he asked weakly, remembering plainly the first time when Eileen had killed herself in his other life.

"Come with me, Severus," Dumbledore said simply.

Severus, the truth of his mother's death sinking in, allowed the headmaster to lead him through the fireplace. Severus found himself in the sitting room of his home.

"Upstairs," Dumbledore said, motioning toward the stairs. "I'll be down here. Take as long as you need."

Severus didn't utter a single word. His head was spinning, and with every step he took, he wondered if his knees wouldn't give out from under him. His anger at Dumbledore months previously for invading his mind was forgotten. It was because of the headmaster that he had been properly informed, but he didn't have the wherewithal to be grateful right now. No, Severus had eyes only for each step that took him closer to the truth.

He slowly made his way up the stairs, disbelief still fighting with the realization that his mother was really gone. He walked down the hallway, stopping just outside the door to his mother's bedroom. Bringing his hand to the knob, Severus closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Maybe this really was all just a twisted joke, a horrible dream...

He turned the knob and pushed the door open, forcing himself to open his eyes and face reality. After what he had lived through once before, he felt he could at least face something already so familiar to him.

He was wrong. When Severus's eyes took in his mother's limp body hanging lifelessly from the ceiling, a rope around her neck, his knees finally did buckle, and he collapsed to the floor, crying. Half-crawling to the area where Eileen had hanged herself, Severus reached desperately for the nearest part of her: her stocking-covered feet. He held those two feet to his face and sobbed into them, as if they were the most precious thing to him.

"Mum, oh, Mum... no..." he moaned helplessly. "Why? Why did you do it?"

For all his years of experience in seeing death and even dying once himself, Severus felt seventeen years old again. He was still the same lost boy weeping at his dead mother's feet. The memory was cruelly alive again, and Eileen was dead.

Author's Note: This was an extremely hard and heart-wrenching chapter to write, but I had this planned from the beginning of the story. Sadly, everything cannot be well in Severus's new life. I'm sorry to have to kill Eileen, but it was needed for the development of

Severus's character, just as much as helping her was needed for his character.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"Severus?" came Dumbledore's voice tentatively from the hallway. Then, a loud gasp. "Oh, my!"

In the midst of his misery, the last thing Severus wanted was to be disrupted. He withdrew from his mother's form and glared at Dumbledore. "You stupid old man!" he shouted accusingly. "Get out of here!"

"Severus, please, let me explain," Dumbledore said, his eyes avoiding looking at Eileen's body. "Trust me, if I had known-"

"If you had known what, Dumbledore?" Severus spat harshly, errant tears still leaking from his eyes. "You bring me here and heartlessly tell me to come upstairs to see my mother's, *my mother's*, body hanging lifelessly from the ceiling? Don't act like you didn't know!"

Bringing out his wand, Severus aimed it at the rope and cut it, then gently levitated Eileen's broken body to the bed. He immediately was at her side, removing the rope from her neck and trying to straighten her out on the bed.

"I didn't know, Severus; I'm sorry," Dumbledore murmured, having the audacity to step into the room. "If I had known she was in such a state, I never would have let you come up here, especially alone."

Severus pointedly ignored the other man, wishing he would go away and leave him in peace to grieve. Refusing to even acknowledge Dumbledore, Severus stared down at his mother and brought his hand to her face, closing her eyes. He nearly hexed Dumbledore the following moment when he felt a hand come to rest on his shoulder. Violently shrugging the hand off and recoiling, Severus unsteadily held his wand up and pointed it at Dumbledore.

"Tell me, Dumbledore," he ground out. "Do you enjoy this? Being so cruel? Watching me suffer?"

Dumbledore, for his part, looked stricken. "Severus, you must listen to reason. I know you don't want to hear it, but you deserve the truth. All my men informed me was that they had found her dead. They

didn't say what method she used or how they had found her, only that her body... was upstairs. I should have checked for myself, but I just assumed it was by magical means that Eileen had..." Dumbledore swallowed, still refusing to look at Eileen. His blue eyes travelled to the window, and he continued, "All I know from the past few days is that she seemed to be doing well enough to function on her own. I had been meaning to let you know, and unfortunately, it was too late when I found out the horrible news a couple of hours ago, but you must know that I would never deliberately do this to hurt you."

Severus was only half-listening to Dumbledore's empty words, or at least that is what they felt like. No amount of explanation was sufficient. No words could bring Eileen back.

"Then I guess you should have told me sooner," Severus spat, "that you knew she was back. It must not have been that important to you, but then again, you don't value me any more than any other Gryffindor values me, besides Lily. Go away, Dumbledore," Severus said, his voice wavering with exhaustion over the extreme emotion he had just endured. "At least grant me this one wish, and leave me in peace to bury my mother."

Dumbledore stepped away, knowing the damage was done and couldn't be repaired. He could have gone into lengthy explanations about the duties of being headmaster and his involvement in the war against Voldemort, but as Dumbledore looked upon this young son grieving over his mother, he couldn't blame him for hating him. All Dumbledore could do was offer his condolences and ask, "Is there anything you need? Anything at all?"

Severus refused to meet Dumbledore's gaze. *My mother back*, he wanted to say, but instead he said, "Tell Lily."

"Of course," Dumbledore replied quietly. "And you will be excused from school for the next week, of course. I will explain the circumstances to your teachers, and arrangements have already been made to take care of your mother."

Severus didn't have the energy to protest. If Dumbledore hadn't called on the necessary people to take Eileen's body away and prepare it for the funeral, Severus would have done it, but to

Dumbledore, Severus was a seventeen-year-old boy without parents. It was probably the only sensible thing Dumbledore had thought to do for him.

Dumbledore left, and within the hour, Eileen's body was removed from the house. Severus remained in her room, too drained to cry, to feel anything but numbness. He eventually fell asleep on the bed in the same spot where Eileen's body had lain earlier. All thoughts of why all this happened would have to wait until Severus could think reasonably again.

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Severus refused to leave his mother's room, with the exception of bathroom trips. He felt the need to somehow punish himself in what he saw as his failing in saving his mother this time around. He was somewhere between sleeping and waking when he heard the only welcoming voice he would allow.

"Sev?" Lily's gentle voice asked. He felt his hair brushed aside from his forehead, and as Severus opened his eyes, he found himself gazing directly into Lily's green orbs.

"Lily," he croaked.

"Dumbledore told me," she said softly. "I'm so sorry, Sev." She sniffed, and a couple of tears fell down her rosy cheeks.

Severus pushed himself up in the bed into a sitting position and patted the edge of the bed, inviting Lily to sit next to him. The moment she did, he crushed her in a tight embrace and soundlessly cried into her shoulder. Lily wrapped her arms around his trembling, thin form and held him, not saying anything, but still saying everything.

After some time, Severus released his hold on her enough to look into her face. "I didn't expect you to come," he said softly, moved beyond words that she was here.

"Of course I came," Lily said, her tone brooking no argument. "I wanted to come the moment he told me, but I had to finish classes today. Stupid rules," Lily grouched.

Severus couldn't help but smile slightly at her last words. Classes seemed so unimportant right now, but to be reminded that life still went on was somehow reassuring.

Just then, Severus and Lily heard a noise downstairs, causing both of them to jump. Severus stood, holding his wand out. "Lily, stay up here," he hissed. He inched toward the door.

"No way," Lily hissed back. "I'm not leaving you alone again, Sev."

He didn't protest, but focused on listening for another sound from below. Suddenly, a matronly voice called, "Mr. Snape, are you home?"

"Holy shit," Severus said between bared teeth, having almost shouted in shock. "It's Madam Pomfrey," he whispered to Lily. "Although, I'm pretty sure it is." Not foolish enough to risk going downstairs unarmed, Severus made his way to the top of the steps and looked down. Madam Pomfrey was brushing soot off her clothes and bustling around the house downstairs.

"Severus?" she called.

"Oh, bloody hell," Severus muttered, rolling his eyes. "Madam Pomfrey!" he replied. "What are you doing here?"

Madam Pomfrey visibly jumped and stopped moving, staring up the steps, seeing Severus standing there, and just behind him, Lily. "There are you," she said kindly. "The headmaster told me what had happened and thought you might appreciate someone to talk to who was a little, erm, older. I see you've got Miss Evans with you already, child, but after what you've suffered, I volunteered to be the one to come check up on you."

Well, this is surprising, Severus thought. Unlike last time when he had been completely alone to grieve for his mother, he now had two people visiting him, people who obviously cared about him. Having recovered enough from his earlier emotional outburst upon Lily's arrival, Severus went down the stairs and greeted Madam Pomfrey. Lily followed.

"You didn't have to come," he said awkwardly. He wasn't used to feeling touched or gracious, nor did Severus know how to properly thank most people.

"Nonsense, child," Madam Pomfrey said endearingly.

Severus didn't mind being referred to as "child" by the older woman. Unlike Dumbledore, he trusted her enough to know that she had his best interests at heart. Severus still wasn't convinced by Dumbledore's empty apologies and explanation from yesterday.

Madam Pomfrey hugged him briefly, even though Severus only delicately patted her on the back once in return. "How are you holding up?" she asked once she had released him.

"Fine," Severus said shortly.

"You're a bad liar," Madam Pomfrey said gently. "No one would be fine after losing their mother like that."

Severus nodded, not wanting to argue. He wondered if Madam Pomfrey would say anything further about Dumbledore's excuses for his seeming lack of tact, but she didn't. All she did was express, on behalf of the staff, their condolences and that he was, of course, excused from any homework he missed during that upcoming week. Severus thought it odd that Madam Pomfrey was taking on the role that either Dumbledore or his head of house, Slughorn, should have. What value would Slughorn find in an orphaned boy disliked by the general population of Hogwarts, though? And Severus already felt he knew what value Dumbledore placed on his life.

Madam Pomfrey visited with the two teenagers for the next couple of hours, pointedly refusing to allow Severus to even serve her tea. Instead, she took on the role of hostess and made the tea and even prepared a small meal for them, muttering the whole time about how Severus was already too thin and needed to take better care of himself.

When the matron finally left, Severus was in Lily's sweet company once again. She made a fire, and they sat in the sitting room as it grew dark.

"I suppose everyone in the whole school knows what happened now?" Severus implored bitterly.

Lily nodded sadly. "Yes, but not the details. Maybe you won't believe this, Sev, but Remus wanted me to tell you he was sorry to hear about your mother. Even Potter looked shocked by the news and didn't make any rude comments."

Snorting, Severus muttered, "How kind of them."

"Sev," Lily said witheringly, "I'm only trying to help. There's nothing I can say to change what happened, but-"

"No, Lily, you're right," Severus cut in. "There's nothing you can say, so don't bother."

Since Severus was through crying and had moved on to moodiness, Lily knew she had to thread carefully. His brash responses might sting, but Lily knew him better than to think he was trying to hurt her intentionally. She saw a stricken and wounded boy when she looked at Severus, and she didn't blame him in the least for lashing out. Lily remained quiet and only held him closer. She would make sure he knew she wasn't going anywhere, now or ever.

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The day of the funeral was an early April day, and it was still quite cold outside. The trees were mostly bare, but a couple of them were showing signs of new life. Few people attended the funeral. Severus sat next to Lily, staring blankly ahead, past the casket, the whole time, not listening to the hollow words uttered by a Ministry official who didn't even know Eileen. Lily's mother and father sat right behind them, the only Muggles there. Severus hadn't seen his father.

After the funeral, Severus purposefully walked away from the small crowd gathered near the freshly dug grave. He didn't want to receive their false condolences, or at least that was what he felt they were. Even Lily's company seemed to fall short of bringing him comfort right now. In the past couple of days, Severus had forced away all the emotions he had initially felt. Being closed and unfeeling was easier than being so vulnerable. Caring too much only set a person up to be

burned and hurt. With the loss of his dear mother, Severus had lost his willingness to care.

And so, he found he didn't care with the same level of vehemence he might have felt otherwise when he noticed his father standing near a tree some distance away. He was about to walk on, pretending he hadn't noticed the other man, but Tobias pursued his son.

"Severus," Tobias stated. For once, his words weren't slurred.

"Stopped drinking just in time for the funeral, have you?" Severus retorted, glaring at his father.

"Severus, listen to me," Tobias implored. "I never- It shouldn't have happened this way."

"Go away, Father," Severus sighed, sounding plain exhausted.

"Severus, wait!" Tobias called after him. "Won't you at least give me a chance to explain? You told me last time I spoke with you that you'd at least talk to me if I sobered up."

Severus paused and turned, not sure why he was giving his father this much. The man was undeserving of an inch of understanding. As Severus took in his father, he noticed that he was not only sober, but he was cleaned up. His clothes were secondhand, no doubt, but they weren't ratty and torn like before. Tobias's hair was clean, and he lacked the stubble on his face that had been there previously.

"Well?" Severus asked impatiently, folding his arms over his chest.

"I did what you asked of me, Severus. I got help. I haven't had a drink in over a month. I got a job again. I have a place to live. I understand that you don't want me back in the house, not... not after everything that's happened. I have to tell you- I saw Eileen just two days before she, before she..." he trailed off, and Severus frowned. Why was his father sounding like he was choked up? The bastard had no right to grieve, not after what he had done to his wife all those years! Then, he was talking again. "I tried to talk to her. I- I begged her to let me come home, if only to see the house and her one last time, and I'd

leave her and you alone forever, but she only screamed and disappeared, literally, in thin air, in front of me."

Severus's eyes bulged. "Mum did m-magic?" he stammered.

"Apparently," Tobias muttered. "Anyway, when I read in the paper the other day... oh, Severus, I'm sorry. I never meant for it to get this out of hand."

"What do you want from me, Father?" Severus spat hatefully. "Forgiveness? Compassion? It's too late for that now. You know you're the reason she went mental. Now, you have to live with that. Surely you didn't think you'd come here today, expecting to find me weak and lacking for a parental figure and that I'd welcome you back with open arms, did you?"

"As much as I hoped... one day..." Tobias trailed off, shaking his head sadly. "I do regret it... all of it, Severus. You don't have to like me. You can hate me, in fact, but I hope one day you will believe me. I did once know how to love your mother."

"That time has long since passed, Father," Severus muttered. "It would seem... we've both really fucked up. We're damned men, you and I. Drink to that, Father, when you stumble into the next pub after finishing talking with me today. Long live pathetic excuses of men, father and son."

Severus didn't look back as he left Tobias standing there, but neither did Tobias go after his lost son. Tobias knew Severus was right.

They were damned.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

When Severus returned to Hogwarts, he had no illusions of his life returning to normal, as if things would pick up where they left off. His mother was gone, dead, leaving him crowded with a constant emptiness that not even Lily could fill. He had shrugged away her attempts at comforting him, which although Lily was trying her best to be understanding and give him his space, she couldn't help feeling hurt by his apparent rejection.

His professors were kind enough, of course, not expecting him to be able to concentrate during class, but neither did they take a single moment to ask him how he was faring, even if it was obvious that he wasn't doing well. Instead of going to the library to study with Lily or enjoying the warmer weather outside like other kids, Severus would confine himself to his bedroom, listless and withdrawn as ever.

His fellow students stared at him, some with fear and others with disgust. If any looked upon him with compassion or sorrow, Severus didn't notice.

It wasn't until two weeks after his return that Lily had finally convinced him to take a walk around the lake with her.

"Promise not to talk too much?" Severus asked.

"Anything to be with you, Sev," Lily replied sadly. She longed to say more, to question why he pushed her away when he should have sought her company for comfort, to wonder what was really going through his mind, to tell him what she was feeling, to insist that his life didn't have to end, too.

Severus scowled, knowing all the veiled thoughts behind Lily's few words. He could have retorted with rude comments about not understanding what he was experiencing, about not wanting to be weak anymore, to be so vulnerable as to set himself up to be hurt again. Severus inwardly sighed, knowing in his adult experience that he was not a sulky teenager, but knowing he still needed time to deal with the aftermath as he felt most adequate.

And so, Severus accompanied Lily around the lake that afternoon after classes. The sun fought with the clouds, intermittently shining through and warming their faces. Spring was now in its glory, and Severus realized what he had been missing by staying inside. He allowed Lily to hold his hand, and in companionable silence, he felt a small amount of peace.

Their peace was quickly shattered, however, when Sirius Black made his presence known by stepping out from behind a tree. It couldn't be more obvious that he had been waiting for them.

"Nice afternoon for a stroll with a pretty girl, isn't it, Snivellus?" he mocked, smirking.

"Just ignore him, Sev," Lily whispered to Severus, glaring at Sirius. "Go away, Black."

"What's the problem?" Sirius insisted. "All I did was pose an innocent question."

Severus, too, glared at Black. "You would do well to listen to Lily, Black," he snarled. "I have nothing to say to you."

"You mean, you don't want to talk about losing your mum? Come on, Snivelly, spill the beans. You've been crying in your room the past two weeks, haven't you? That's why I never see you."

Lily was about to hex Sirius, but another voice interrupted. Remus Lupin stepped onto the scene. "Lay off it, Sirius," Lupin said firmly to his friend.

Severus's eyes were large with shock, but then again, Lupin had tried to play peacemaker as an adult. He sneered at Lupin, "I don't need your help, Lupin. In fact, it disgusts me even more than Black's rudeness."

Lupin frowned at Severus. "Whether you want it or not, Snape, that's not the point. I *am* a prefect, and if another student is out of line, I have a right to intervene."

Severus snorted. "That never crossed your mind before, I suppose? How many times have your mates saw fit to harass me and you never said a word?"

"Fair point," Lupin agreed (too easily, Severus thought). "Come on, Sirius. Let's go."

Sirius frowned at Lupin and muttered something about him being a spoilsport and no fun. Thankfully, the two male Gryffindors left Severus and Lily to themselves.

"Remus finally grew a backbone," Lily mused, truly impressed and trying to make light of the situation.

"Who cares," Severus muttered. "He's just covering for Black, hoping to save his ass as much as Black's."

"Sev," Lily said witheringly, "can't you believe that maybe he meant well on your behalf?"

"No."

"Why is it so hard for you to accept that others besides me might have your best interests in mind?" Lily questioned, unable to help herself. She was growing frustrated with Severus's stubbornness to address his feelings and cope with the loss of his mother.

"You wouldn't understand," Severus said bitterly. "I *know* Lupin doesn't care a whit about me. Why should he? What reason have I ever given him to? I can plainly understand why so few would give a shit. *I haven't given them any reason to, Lily.* I drive people away; it's what I do best. Give me long enough, and you'll leave me, too."

Lily felt her heart breaking for him. Seeing Severus undone at the seams like this was the first time she had witnessed any real emotion from him since the day she had first come to him after he lost his mother. They had stopped walking and were near a small copse of trees, giving them enough privacy. Lily reached for his hand and squeezed it.

"No, Sev, that's where you're wrong," she said firmly. "I'm not going anywhere, and I'll keep telling you that until it's pounded into that thick skull of yours, you git. You've got to stop beatng yourself up. It's not your fault, you know. You did what you could for her."

"Which wasn't enough," Severus murmured, looking at the ground.

Bringing her other hand to his face, Lily gently forced him to look at her. "You did your best, Sev. You loved her, and she knew that. Our best is all we can give, and I know you. You would give your best, but you wouldn't want anyone to know. You would do everything in secret, because for some crazy reason, you don't want others to know your true intentions. Sev, why- what happened to make you so closed off from nearly everybody else? The world is full of good people who would accept you, if only you would let them know the real you."

"I thought we weren't going to talk," Severus said pointedly, not wishing to dive into a deep conversation about his supposed true self and his real motivations, whatever those might be.

Knowing she wouldn't get him to open up, Lily sighed dejectedly. "Okay, no more words," she murmured. Instead, she hugged him, and Severus caved to this small security.

From beyond the trees, hidden in the bushes under his Invisibility Cloak was James Potter. James had just seen the whole interaction between Severus and Lily, and he had to hold his jaw closed, lest it drop in shock.

Merlin, she really does love him, and he... he loves her, too, in his own twisted way, he thought.

Chapter Thirty

That same day, in the evening in the Gryffindor common room, Lily found Lupin sitting by the fireplace working on his Transfigurations homework. She sat down next to him.

Lupin stopped what he was doing and looked at her quizzically. "Hi, Lily," he said. "Is there something you wanted?"

"Actually, yeah," she replied in a hushed voice, not wanting James, Sirius, or Pettigrew to overhear. The other three boys were joking about something or other amongst themselves in the corner on the other side of the room.

"All right, then," Lupin said awkwardly, wondering why she was deliberating. He glanced nervously over at his friends and back at Lily.

"I just wanted to thank you for standing up to Black earlier."

"Oh, that," Lupin murmured, once again shifting his eyes from his friends to Lily. "It was nothing."

"It wasn't nothing," Lily stated firmly, perhaps a little too loudly, for the other boys glanced over at the pair of them. Lily, however, didn't seem to care about being overheard anymore. She wanted to make it clear what she was going to say next. "What Black said to Severus was just downright cruel."

This provoked the desired response. Sirius scowled at Lily and Lupin, shouting across the room, "Oi, what are you two talking about?" He made his way toward them, followed by James and Pettigrew.

Hands on her hips, Lily stood and glared at him. "You think you're so great, don't you? Between Potter and you, it's amazing you don't fly away as hot air balloons, what with such inflated heads."

"Hey," James cut in defensively. "I didn't say anything!"

"Maybe not this time, but that never stopped you before, Potter," Lily said heatedly.

James looked from Lily to Sirius, puzzled. "Just what did you say to piss her off this badly, mate?"

"I wasn't insulting *her*," Sirius explained exasperatedly. "She was with Snape. All I said was he's probably been crying over his dead mum the past couple of weeks. We've hardly seen him, after all." Sirius smirked, thinking he was amusing. Only Pettigrew's girlish sniggers came.

James frowned at Sirius.

"What's got your knickers in a twist?" Sirius asked James. "Remus, did your seriousness rub off on him or something?"

Lupin sighed and put away his homework, standing up, figuring he would have to join the conversation. "I didn't say anything to James," Lupin replied. "But really, Sirius, that comment you said earlier was going too far."

Sirius's smile faltered. "You've got to be kidding me," he protested. "This is *Snape* we're talking about here."

"Yeah, mate, we know that," James replied impatiently, thinking of witnessing Severus with Lily earlier. As unhappy as he was with the truth, he couldn't deny what he saw. "Assuming your mum was a decent mother, Sirius, how would you feel if you lost her?"

Lily's eyes grew large, and she wondered if she was hearing correctly. James glanced at her knowingly and smiled slightly. She recalled him using her given name on more occasions lately to address her, starting with the day Severus and she had been attacked in Hogsmeade. Was he trying to win her over by being nice instead of a prick like usual? Or could it be possible he was actually showing signs of maturity?

During the whole conversation, Pettigrew stood there stupidly, not contributing anything but a puzzled look on his features. Sirius marginally looked at him, realizing he wasn't going to receive any backing up from Lupin or James. "My mum is an evil menace," Sirius muttered darkly. He crossed his arms over his chest and walked

away, apparently having had enough of the topic of defending Severus Snape.

Lily, not knowing what to make of James, left the boys and dismissed herself for the evening, making the convenient excuse that she was tired. Once she reached her room, however, she couldn't sleep. While James hadn't outrightly defended Severus, he hadn't degraded him, either. Lily frowned to herself. She wasn't going to be fooled. For now, she tried to convince herself that it was nothing more than an act. James Potter was a pompous jerk, plain and simple.

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Severus slowly felt himself returning to normal, although he knew he would never feel the same after losing his mother. It was bad enough he had lost her once before, but twice? That was too much.

He still couldn't understand why he hadn't been able to save her. Hadn't he tried so hard, and for what? Nothing? Despite his bitterness, Severus was more receptive to Lily's kindness. While his initial emptiness made him close up and close in and caused him to push her away, he knew better than to allow himself to go too far down the path of selfishness. He could hurt himself if he wanted, but hurting Lily was inexcusable.

One thing Severus also noticed in the following weeks was that the Marauders weren't together as much. He would see two of them together, but they were usually alone, which was odd indeed. Potter and Black had been inseparable for six years, and they had made sure he knew it, too. While Black would still mutter rude comments whenever Severus passed, he seemed to lack his vigor. Potter didn't so much as look at Severus, and Lupin had the audacity to try and say hello to him on a couple of occasions. If Lupin was pitying him for losing his mother, Severus would make sure to put the other boy in his place. He didn't need the werewolf's pity or false kindness.

It wasn't Lupin who Severus ran into after classes one afternoon in the hall, though.

Potter.

Severus frowned and made to head the other way, but Potter called after him. "Snape!"

With a long suffering sigh, Severus glowered at the other boy. "What do you want, Potter?"

"Have you got a minute?" Potter asked, glancing around uneasily.

"Fine," Severus muttered, curious to hear what Potter was itching to say, as he appeared uncomfortable.

"Do you really love Lily?" he blurted out.

Severus gave Potter an incredulous look. "That's not really your business, Potter," he sneered. "If you're here to start with the rude remarks, I have better things to do with my time-" He made to leave, but Potter had the nerve to actually grab his arm and stop him.

"Let go of me, Potter, or you'll regret it," Severus said between bared teeth, his wand ready.

Potter released him immediately and stepped back defensively. "No need for the wand, Snape. I only want to talk. Look, you know I've fancied Lily for years now, but if she's taken, I mean really taken, I want to know."

Regarding Potter skeptically, Severus inquired, "And why is it so important to you?"

"I'll, uh... I'll back off if she's really with you," Potter blurted out quickly.

Severus gaped at him disbelievingly, but seeing how uncharacteristically humble Potter seemed at the moment, he wondered if Potter might be serious. "Then fine, yes, Lily and I are together," Severus stated, feeling his pride swell inside.

Potter nodded and turned, muttering, "Sorry about your mum." He was gone before Severus could formulate a reply.

Left wondering if the previous scene had really just happened, Severus pinched himself. Shaking his head dazedly, Severus headed

for his room, wondering if this was Potter's way of apologizing for years of being such a git.

Chapter Thirty-One

Severus wasn't sure what to make of James Potter's declaration that he would leave him alone. Ever skeptical, Severus wasn't ready to believe those words until he saw proof in Potter's actions. For six years, Potter had been the bane of Severus's existence. Potter had never missed a moment to find a new way to torment him, and now, he was surrendering? Could Potter just be trying a new approach to gain Lily's good graces and surprise Severus by tricking him?

Oddly enough, Potter didn't seem to give Severus much attention at all in the following days. Much to Sirius Black's dismay, his best friend was no longer finding amusement in ridiculing and jinxing Severus. Severus noticed an almost constant frown on Black's face nowadays, and inwardly, he smirked. Could the Marauders be drifting apart, or had the great divide already happened?

Choosing not to discuss it, Severus wasn't pleased when Lily brought up the subject of Potter one day in early May.

"It's the strangest thing," Lily was saying. "He's almost a gentlemen now."

"Toward you, perhaps," Severus muttered moodily. "Potter has fancied you for years, Lily. His approach may have changed, but that doesn't mean his intentions have."

Lily grimaced. "Do you really think so, Sev?" she asked pointedly. "You told me yourself what he said to you, about backing off. Maybe he's finally realized that I'm taken."

Lily wrapped her arm around his as they walked while saying those last few words and pulled him closer. Severus blushed a little, intently ignoring the stares they were attracting from others.

"I stand by what I said, Lily," Severus stated firmly. "Before you say I'm being pessimistic, which may be true in its own right, know that it's more a matter of being *realistic*. I've lived long enough to know that people often say one thing and do quite the opposite."

His last line earned a perplexed look from Lily. "Lived long enough?" she queried. "You talk like you're old and experienced, Sev," she teased.

Inwardly, Severus berated himself for the slip of the tongue. Despite having relived nearly a year of his new life, he still wasn't completely used to it. He didn't imagine he would feel his true age until his body actually caught up with his mind... if that ever happened.

"Well, maybe not so long in years," he amended, "but experiences, perhaps."

Lily nodded. That was true enough. Few people she knew had dealt with the abuse he had as a child, had a mentally unstable mother who died, and an alcoholic father, and that was just his home life.

"I guess it has been hard for you," she admitted. "I mean, being sorted into Slytherin--"

"What's wrong with Slytherin?" he asked defensively, on reflex.

"Sev, if you'd let me finish," Lily said heatedly, "I could get to my point. As I was saying, you were sorted into Slytherin, which is the toughest house to be in. I mean, you really have to fight to keep your head above water, and the other houses look down on you. You know this. It's just unfair."

"Sympathy from a Gryffindor?" Severus asked sarcastically, unable to help himself. Sobering, he added, "Unfortunately, what you say it true."

If he wanted to, Severus could have dwelt on his old friends from Slytherin, but he chose not to. Lily had never approved of them, and while Severus certainly didn't need her approval, he knew from experience the first time what being friends with people like Avery and Mulciber would lead to.

"Anyway," Lily was now saying, "don't worry about Potter."

Severus nodded. Perhaps Potter wasn't the one he needed to worry about, for Black had been the one lately who had been a menace

toward him. Without his friends backing him up, though, Severus wasn't afraid of Black. In a duel, he could easily beat the pretty boy Gryffindor.

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The following day, Severus's duelling skills were tested.

He wasn't with Lily this time when the attack came. While headed to his private room, Severus thought he would be safe from harm. No one, even his old Slytherin friends, had managed to follow him to his bedroom. Regrettably, his privacy would not last.

"Hey, Snivellus," came a nasty voice from the shadows.

Severus dropped his bag and reached for his wand, holding it out, ready for the impending attack. He saw a red flash of light, probably a Stunning Spell, and deflected it.

"Come out and face me like a man, Black, if you're so ready to start firing hexes," Severus growled.

Sirius Black emerged from the darkness along the wall. His handsome features were twisted into an unflattering sneer, very uncharacteristic for him.

"I bet you're really congratulating yourself, aren't you, Snape?" Black asked. "You lose your mother, and you gain sympathy from my friends. I won't be so easily fooled, though."

"Is that right?" Severus retorted.

"I've known the truth about you for years now, Snivellus. You'd be better off dead. You'll never amount to anything but another Death Eater. It's a bloody shame Remus didn't get you last year."

Severus bristled with hatred. He had always hated Sirius Black, but since when did Black speak with such venom? Black had always spoken of the Shrieking Shack incident as "a joke" or "a prank" before. While Severus believed Black meant for him to die, he had never actually heard vocal confirmation from Black about it.

"Think what you want, Black," Severus hissed, "but you would be no better than these Death Eaters you talk about if you killed me. Do you really want blood on your delicate hands?"

"You don't get it, do you, Snape? I *know* what Dark wizards are like. I come from a whole family of them. My parents support You-Know-Who, and my younger brother is growing up finely to make another addition to his ranks. My cousin Bellatrix signed right up. I vowed to be different from the filth I came from. I swore I'd fight against wizards who are Dark, and I've seen you, Snape. You're up to your greasy head in the Dark Arts. I don't know what you think you're doing with poor Lily Evans, but now you've got James and Remus dooped that you're not such a bad guy. You don't fool me for a second, you Death Eater scum."

"Are you jealous you've lost your little friends, Black?" Severus asked, smirking. All of Black's comments rolled off his back. He had heard far worse before.

"Shut up!" Black suddenly bellowed, whipping his wand out, ready to attack.

In an instant, Severus had his wand at the ready. His heart was thumping loudly in his head, the adrenaline coursing through him.

"James had it right about you, Snape," Black continued. "He may have forgotten, but you deserved to be tormented for even *existing*. Your disgusting bitch of a mother made a huge mistake having you, and even she must not have been able to stand you, what with how she killed herself and all. Tell me, Snivellus, did you weep upon her dead body, knowing that you killed her because she was so ashamed of you? Or did she do it because she hated herself for giving birth to such a pathetic curse of a person?"

With every word that Black uttered, Black's hatred increased, but Severus found his own loathing boiling over. It was one thing for Black to talk badly about Severus, but to bring Severus's mother into matters was unforgivable. Images of Eileen's body hanging from the ceiling, her lifeless eyes staring up at nothing, and crying into her cold feet flashed through Severus's mind. All efforts of controlling his emotions since her death failed, and he felt the pain as hot and real

as if it were happening all over again. In his agony, Severus felt the prickling of tears of rage form and then spill over. His entire body was trembling, and as he lifted his right hand and made a quick slashing motion numerous times over, he wasn't aware of what he was doing. All he felt was the overwhelming affliction washing over him, like suffering from ten Crucios at once.

His rage released, Severus opened his eyes. Black was no longer talking. His screams had been lost to Severus. Realization at what he had done, Severus dropped his wand, and it hit the stone floor with a resounding bang, echoes rattling down the corridor. He took a step back as the blood pooled at his feet.

There, lying on the floor, sprawled out and shaking, was the bloody, mangled mass of Sirius Black.

Author's Note: Sirius's back story will be explained.

Chapter Thirty-Two

With dawning horror, the realization at what he had done struck Severus like a blow to the stomach, and he felt sick. Knowing he had precious few minutes before someone came if Sirius's screams had been overheard, Severus knelt at the other boy's side and began the healing spell. His concentration was fully on the spell, lest he slip and killed the sorry bastard.

The lacerations healed, but Severus knew Black would still need to go to the infirmary. Reminded of walking in on a very similar scene when Harry Potter had stupidly used Sectumsempra on Draco Malfoy, Severus was disgusted with himself... and very afraid in that moment. How had he let his emotions take such hold on him that he had lost control of his magic and done this much damage?

Sure, Severus hated Black, but he didn't wish him dead. He had only been so keen to see Black receive the Dementor's Kiss because he had once thought, like everybody else, that Black had been responsible for betraying the secret location of the Potters, and that had meant Lily's death.

Horried at what he had done, Severus wanted to run, leave the school, and never return, but like he imagined, within a couple of minutes, students who had overheard Black's piercing screams arrived on the scene. Gasps and looks of shock and fear met Severus. He gazed at the floor, unable to look into their judging faces, and surely not wishing to gaze upon the victim of his brutal, unbound magic.

Then, a Scottish voice demanded, "What is the meaning of this? Mr. Snape, what in the name of Merlin have you done to Mr. Black?"

This is it, Severus thought miserably. I'm going to be expelled at the very least.

Drawing his courage, Severus forced himself to meet the eyes of the speaker. McGonagall was as white as a sheet, and her face was filled with a mixture of dread and anger. What could he possibly say? No words came when he feebly opened his mouth. Instead, his

shoulders dropped in defeat, and he resumed to staring at the stone floor.

"Mr. Baker and Mr. Reyes, please take Mr. Black to the infirmary," McGonagall instructed two Hufflepuffs standing nearby. "Mr. Snape, come with me."

She stepped around the blood, which Severus hadn't had time to clean up before the students began pouring in. Resigned to his fate, Severus didn't bother to protest or defend himself. He followed McGonagall to the headmaster's office.

"You will tell Professor Dumbledore what you did," she admonished, "and he will decide what to do with you."

As they stepped onto the revolving staircase, Severus felt like everything he had worked for the past year had been for nothing. He had been reborn the same man he had died. Nothing had changed. He couldn't help but be reminded of the hatred in McGonagall's voice and the loathing on her face as she led the other teachers in driving him out of Hogwarts mere hours before his demise. He had died a traitor in their eyes, and with a heavy heart, Severus knew they would always see him as nothing worthy in this life.

They arrived at the door to Dumbledore's office, and McGonagall knocked. Within seconds, the door was opened, and Dumbledore stood there, a perplexed expression on his aged face. The old wizard looked from McGonagall to Severus and frowned.

"Minerva, I trust something has happened?" he inquired.

"Yes, Headmaster," she stated crisply. "Several students and I just overheard terrible screaming coming from the guest wing, and so, I went to see what the cause was. I found Sirius Black lying in a pool of blood, unconscious, and Mr. Snape was standing over him with his wand out."

"Very well, Minerva," Dumbledore replied evenly. "I trust Mr. Black is being tended to now?"

"Yes," McGonagall said.

"Thank you, Minerva," the headmaster said in way of dismissing her. "I shall take it from here."

McGonagall left with a brisk nod and was gone. Severus felt his insides go as cold as ice as he stepped into Dumbledore's office. Dumbledore didn't say anything for a long time, and Severus wondered if this was part of his punishment: to be subjected to minutes that seemed like hours of Dumbledore's scrutiny.

"Mr. Snape," Dumbledore finally addressed him, "do you wish to tell me why you used a such Dark Magic on Mr. Black? What curse did you employ, anyway? I have never seen something like it."

Severus muttered, "Sectumsempra."

"I'm sorry?" Dumbledore asked.

"The curse," Severus said pathetically, "was called Sectumsempra. You know the Latin, I trust, Headmaster? 'Always cutting.' I... I invented it, sir."

Dumbledore's white eyebrows raised to his hairline. "You invented it?" he inquired sharply. Severus could hear the trepidation in the headmaster's voice. "You are all of seventeen years old, and you invented a spell which can do that?"

Severus knew what Dumbledore was thinking. He was both awed and fearful of the young man in front of him.

"So young to have mingled with such Dark Magic, Severus," Dumbledore said sorrowfully. "My concerns for you have been confirmed, then."

"No," Severus protested without thinking.

"No?" Dumbledore asked closely. "Do explain yourself, Severus. Why did you curse Mr. Black?"

"He was... he was going on about my mum, all right?" Severus snarled. "I didn't- I didn't mean for it to happen, sir; I swear! You won't believe me, of course, but that's the truth. Professor McGonagall

failed to mention that I promptly *healed* Black after I attacked him. He would have been dead by the time she arrived if I hadn't, but that doesn't matter, does it? I attacked another student, and you're going to expel me at the very least, so why don't you do us all a favor and get on with it? Expel me and leave me free to my fate, which I'm sure you know without a doubt is joining the Death Eaters!"

"Severus, I never-" Dumbledore tried to say.

"Don't deny it!" Severus bellowed, his own body shaking with fury. "You and everyone else know it!"

"Calm down," Dumbledore interjected firmly. "If what you say is true, that you didn't intend to attack Mr. Black, then show me."

Severus glared at him. "You're not poking around in my mind."

"I didn't intend to. Use the Pensieve. Do you know how it works?"

Severus nodded mutely. He brought his wand to his temple and retrieved the memory. Dumbledore placed the Pensieve on the desk in front of them, and Severus added the silvery thread to it. Dumbledore's expression was blank as he dove into the memory. A few moments later, he returned, a look of pity on his face.

"You did tell the truth, then," he said. "What Mr. Black said to you was awful, and while that didn't give you the excuse to attack, you didn't do it knowingly. You have been under extreme distress this entire year, my boy, and the loss of your mother has only made it worse, I am sure. And yes, you did heal him. While I am still concerned that you know such Dark Magic and are inventing your own spells, while impressive, it is also dangerous and gives me plenty of reason to worry about you, Severus. You are a powerful, intelligent wizard, but your history and your actions make your position precarious. I don't know what to make of you."

Utterly shocked, Severus sputtered, "Then- then just do it."

"Do what?" Dumbledore questioned.

"Expel me. That's what you're going to do, isn't it? You expelled Mulciber when he attacked me. I just attacked another student. If I'm so questionable as you seem to think, then assume the worse. I'm just like Mulciber. I deserve nothing less."

Shaking his head sadly, Dumbledore said gently, "That is where you are wrong, Severus. For all your faults and shortcomings, you are *not* like your old friend Mulciber. He took pleasure in attacking you, and he attacked you in the first place because of what he felt to be a betrayal of friendship. You disassociated yourself from those who were bad influences on you, and I have seen tremendous growth in you this year. Your relationship with Miss Evans is only one of the good things I see in you. A wizard with your skill and power can do much good for the world, but with much power comes much responsibility. You are young yet, but you know the ways of the world. As we speak, there is a war going on out there, and I, for one, would like to see you choose to fight for what's right, Severus. The world could use a wizard like you for the greater good."

"And why does the greater good concern me?" Severus muttered bitterly, thinking of his past life's sacrifices. His life had never been his own to live, whether fighting for the Dark or the Light. "I just want to live my life and be left alone. Is that too much to ask?"

"There will come a time when you will have to choose, Severus, but today is not that day. Anyway, you are not expelled, but I cannot allow what you have done to go unpunished. I'm taking a hundred points from Slytherin and you will be serving detention every Saturday afternoon for the rest of the school year."

Feeling he had been given a reprieve, Severus accepted his punishment. He was floored by Dumbledore's words. Could he truly believe the headmaster, or was this part of Dumbledore's plan to put Severus into the right position and play him when the moment came? Still too wary to trust Dumbledore completely, Severus eyed the door, wishing to escape to his room.

"Before you go, you may take your memory back," Dumbledore said. "It is yours, after all."

"Thank you," Severus replied stiffly, forcing his unbound emotions back inside. He didn't particularly want that memory, but neither did he feel it wise to leave it for the headmaster's use. After retrieving it, Severus exited the headmaster's office.

The whole walk back to his bedroom was met with glares and stares of fear from the students. They muttered amongst themselves as he passed, and all Severus could think was: What was Lily thinking about him now? The whole school knew what had happened.

When he entered his room, he flopped onto the bed, burying his face ashamedly into the pillow, wondering if he would have been better off expelled. Surely Lily would have no reason to love him now.

I'm sorry, Lily.

Chapter Thirty-Three

When Lily heard the news of what Severus had done to Sirius, she refused to believe it at first. Gossip was always a part of every day at school, but when she returned to the Gryffindor common room and found James, Lupin, and Pettigrew without Sirius, her fears were confirmed.

"Where's Black?" she asked, trying to sound casual, hoping against hope that he was simply out wreaking havoc somewhere.

"What? You didn't hear?" James questioned, aghast.

As Lily looked at him, his normally cheerful face was twisted into an angry expression. "I heard right, then," Lily murmured dejectedly.

"We can't even go visit Sirius!" James yelled. "And to think I was trying to be decent toward Snape the past few weeks," he scoffed. "Is this how he repays kindness, by almost murdering my best friend?"

"I'm sure there's a perfectly good explanation for it," Lily tried to reason, although she felt something in the pit of her stomach sinking.

Oh, Sev, what did you do? she thought hopelessly. She wanted to find him and hear from his own lips what had transpired, as she didn't think Severus would have done something so seemingly cruel for no reason.

"Well, I'd like to bloody well hear it," James insisted hotly. "Next time I see Snape, he'll pay."

"James, maybe Lily's right-" Lupin started to say, having been quiet until now.

"Listen to you two!" James exclaimed disgustedly. "I was almost taken in, too... feeling badly for the bastard because he'd just lost his mother."

Lily thought James might spit on the floor, but he didn't. She stubbornly refused to believe that Severus would have acted so harshly, even toward Sirius, without good reason. Unable to stand

being near James a moment longer, Lily left the common room with a huff, intent on finding Severus and hearing his side of the story.

Back in the common room, James was continuing to vent about this apparent injustice.

"How can she just assume there's more to the story?" James demanded, looking at Lupin and Pettigrew for a legitimate answer.

"Well, he, uh..." Pettigrew stupidly stuttered.

Rolling his eyes, James snapped, "If you can't get it out of you, Peter, then you'd just as soon shut it. Well?" he asked, looking directly at Lupin.

"Look, mate," Lupin tried to reason. "You know Lily's very taken with Snape. I'm not defending what he did to Sirius, but you know how Sirius has been acting these past few weeks."

Frowning, James nodded. "Yeah, he's been distant. Ever since... ever since I *tried* to be decent toward Snivellus, Sirius hasn't liked it. Poor guy... he comes from a family full of Dark wizards, and I don't blame him for being upset. Snivelly used to hang around with his Slytherin cronies all the time, and I *know* he's had that big nose of his buried in books on the Dark Arts since he came to Hogwarts, but... I hate to admit it, he seemed to have improved lately. Maybe it's all just a ruse to get Lily to like him. If that's the case, I've got to talk some sense into her."

"Don't you think Lily has enough sense to think for herself?" Lupin interrupted.

James scowled at his friend. "Say, you've been talking back a lot lately, Remus. Since when did you grow a backbone?"

Offended, Lupin replied, "Well, if that's how you feel about it, you can talk to Peter here. I'm sure he has a lot of great advice to offer up."

Lupin stalked away, leaving a nervous Pettigrew looking owlishly up at James.

"Did- did you need my help?" Pettigrew questioned stupidly.

"I've had enough help for one day, thanks," James said moodily, leaving the common room.

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Severus was brooding in his room, wishing to be left alone. He was startled out of his reverie when a resounding series of demanding knocks issued forth from the door. Frowning, he wondered who could be bothering him. Thinking it to be Dumbledore, he went to the door and opened it a fraction.

Staring directly back at him were two fierce green eyes. Severus almost took a step back. He hadn't seen those eyes look so angry at him in a long time.

"Severus, we need to talk," Lily stated, no emotion evident in her controlled voice.

"Not now, Lily," Severus groaned tiredly. He wasn't in the mood to explain himself.

"Oh, I think now's the perfect time," Lily said pointedly, pushing the door open farther and then pushing herself rudely past Severus. She slammed the door behind her, and Severus did take a couple of steps back this time.

"What happened, Severus?" Lily demanded, her hands planted on her hips.

Severus noticed her use of his full name. *Here it goes*, he thought forlornly.

"Lily, listen, I-" he tried to say. He was reminded of his pathetic attempts at begging for her forgiveness in his past life after he had called her a Mudblood. "I-"

Severus couldn't speak. Feeling ashamed and fearful that he had lost her, Severus dropped to the bed, a weak sensation in his knees. He felt sick to the stomach.

"I heard what happened from everyone else in the school," Lily was saying, "but I want to hear it from you."

Severus shook his head miserably. "If you want to leave me, you can."

"What are you talking about, Severus?" Lily asked exasperatedly, thinking he meant she could leave the room.

"You know, if you want to leave me... for someone better," Severus barely uttered.

Lily's face fell, and she walked across the room, placing a hand on his face, gently forcing him to look at her. "Whatever it is, Sev, you can tell me," she said softly. "We've come too far. I'm not going to just abandon you at the first difficulty. Now, come on, tell me what Sirius did that caused you to hurt him so."

Severus noticed Lily's use of Black's first name, but didn't say anything otherwise. He thought his voice might betray him if he dared speak too quickly. How could she be so understanding? Her anger he had expected, but not her compassion.

"He was going on about my mum," he croaked. "Saying she was 'a disgusting bitch' for even having me and that I must have killed her because she was so ashamed of me. He kept going on and on, and I didn't know what I was doing when I attacked... I lost control, Lily. I didn't mean for it to happen, but it did, so there's the story. I even healed him, but I suppose that part has been conveniently left out," he spat.

"I believe you," she said simply, "but, Sev, I heard you'd sliced him?"

"My own spell," he admitted.

There was a scared, apprehensive gleam in her eyes. Lily nodded slowly and backed away from Severus a little. "I know you didn't mean it, Sev, but that was still Dark Magic." Her voice was trembling, and Severus knew she was fearful of him, of what he could do.

"I thought you weren't going to leave," Severus said darkly.

"I'm not," Lily protested, "but I... Sev, I need some time."

Severus felt his heart give, and to make matters worse, she had the audacity to kiss him lightly on the forehead before she swept out of the room so swiftly, it was almost as if she thought he might attack her.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Lily sulked in the library for a few hours after leaving Severus. She had no desire to return to the Gryffindor common room, only to be confronted by James and his friends. Having heard Severus's side of the story, she believed him, of course, but she was itching to know Sirius's side as well. It wasn't that she didn't believe Severus; she just wanted to hear from Sirius's own mouth the recounting of the awful things he had told Severus so she could then promptly make Sirius feel sorry for what he had done.

Unfortunately, her visit to the infirmary would have to wait. James had mentioned no one being allowed to visit Sirius, but Lily figured if she waited long enough, maybe she would be permitted into the hospital wing to demand answers from Sirius.

A part of her didn't blame Severus for reacting the way he had, but his use of Dark Magic scared her. She loved him and had come to understand him better than ever this past year, but she was still frightened by what his anger could evoke. She shuddered at the thought of being on the receiving end of his magic, not that she would ever do anything intentionally to hurt him, but still... Lily wondered what was going through his mind right now, and since she knew him so well, Lily knew without a doubt that Severus was beating himself up over what he had done, even if it was to a bad-mouthing bastard like Sirius Black.

Finally, deciding she had had enough of waiting, Lily left the library and headed toward the infirmary. When she entered, she found Sirius lying on one of the beds near the door. He was awake, and Madam Pomfrey was talking quietly to him. Frowning, knowing she couldn't berate Sirius in front of the matron, Lily stepped into the room.

Madam Pomfrey heard the disturbance and turned her head to see who had entered. "May I help you, Miss Evans?" she asked politely, although guardedly.

"Er, I... just wanted to see how Bl- Sirius was doing," she stated levelly, not wanting to give away her true feelings.

"That's kind of you, dear," Madam Pomfrey replied skeptically, "but he's being discharged. I'm checking him over right now. Why don't you step into my office, as Mr. Black needs his privacy?"

Lily nodded, wondering why Madam Pomfrey simply hadn't asked her to leave and wait up for Sirius back in the Gryffindor common room. She complied and entered Madam Pomfrey's office, which was near the door to the infirmary. Lily cast a quick glance at Sirius, who avoided looking at her, but his expression was dark. As Lily entered the office, she could only imagine the fury that must be bubbling just below the surface in Sirius's mind. Wondering if Madam Pomfrey had some motive for keeping her, Lily walked the short length of the office. She was about to take a seat when her gaze fell upon two files on the mediwitch's desk. Sirius Black's file was out, of course, but oddly enough, so was Severus Snape's... and it was open.

Unable to help herself, Lily approached the desk, glancing quickly toward the door. Seeing that Madam Pomfrey was still otherwise occupied with Sirius, Lily's eyes travelled over the top piece of parchment in Severus's file. It was dated from the previous year, and Lily knew it referred to the Shrieking Shack incident, the one where Severus had vehemently claimed Sirius had tried to kill. With a small gasp, Lily read that Lupin was a werewolf. Thankfully, Severus had only received a couple of scratches, probably more from crawling through the tunnel than from Lupin, and the trauma of the shock from the whole encounter, but what Severus had insisted about Lupin was true.

Lily chanced another glance at the door, and when she saw that Madam Pomfrey was nowhere nearby, she pushed aside the top paper and read the following one. Shocked by how many records of injury there were in his file, Lily realized Severus hadn't told her about most of the times when he had been injured due to the Marauder's so-called pranks or the Dark Magic his own supposed friends had practiced on *him*. Lily noticed Madam Pomfrey's scrawls on several of the records.

Poor boy was a right mess, but headmaster didn't think it necessary to severely punish Gryffs.

Woke up in middle of night to crying. Mental/emotional damage far worse than physical.

Again. His "friends" (as he calls them) did this to him. Had another talk with Dumbledore.

Tears forming in her eyes, Lily couldn't read any more of the reports of Severus's many stays in the infirmary. She remembered all the times she had grown angry with him for hanging around with the wrong crowd and blaming his friends and him for being unfairly cruel toward other students with their Dark Magic. She clearly recalled how she didn't believe his accusations that Lupin was a dangerous monster. She truly had no idea that he had been in the infirmary so frequently in his six years at Hogwarts. Smiling sadly, Lily knew that was Severus's pride that had kept him from admitting what he would have seen as a weakness.

Just then, Madam Pomfrey's kindly voice said from behind, "How is Severus doing?"

With a small gasp of surprise, Lily faced the older woman. "He's... you know, he's..." She couldn't lie. She wouldn't say he was fine, because he obviously wasn't.

"I'm sure he's hating himself for what he's inadvertently done to Mr. Black, but Mr. Black will be fine. They both will. You know as well as I do that your friend is stronger than he realizes."

"Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?" Lily asked.

Madam Pomfrey nodded, taking a seat. "He won't listen to reason from most, but he will listen to you, dear. I trust you've already seen him?"

Lily nodded slightly. Her eyes darted to the file on the desk, and she blurted, "Is Remus Lupin really a werewolf?"

The moment the words left her mouth, Lily wanted desperately to pull them back in again. Madam Pomfrey appeared momentarily shocked and annoyed, but she then sighed, saying, "Yes, I trust you couldn't resist your curiosity and so read Mr. Snape's file?"

"Yes," Lily said guiltily. "It's just that... He's been through so much, Madam Pomfrey, and I had no idea it was this bad until I saw everything in his file. I'm sorry for looking, but I had to know, you know? I... I care about him, but I don't know what I'm supposed to do now. He did use Dark Magic..."

"Yes, he did, but you *know* him, Miss Evans. You probably know more about him than I do, what with growing up together and knowing his home life. All you can do is be a friend, a true friend. That's a rare thing."

"I'll try, but sometimes I feel like I just can't do enough to help," Lily said forlornly, continuing to feel guilty for not believing him so many times in the past.

"You do far more than you realize, child. Now, it's getting late, and you'd best return to your common room. I'm sure you're longing to give Mr. Black a good piece of your mind." Madam Pomfrey winked and smirked.

Unable to help from smiling, Lily released a choked laugh and wished the mediwitch a good evening. As she returned to the common room, she felt better in some ways and worse in others. How could she approach Severus in the following days? Is Severus had been telling the truth about Lupin, what else had she refused to believe before?

Chapter Thirty-Five

It was too late to find Sirius that day by the time Lily returned to the Gryffindor common room, but she wasn't going to let herself forget that he would be on the receiving end of one of her verbal lashings. The following morning, Lily awoke earlier than usual, got dressed, and headed down to the common room, wanting to ensure that she would see Sirius before he had a chance to escape. If he had any sense, he would know she was upset with him already.

Sure enough, Sirius Black came down into the common room with his friends. It seemed that the Marauders were grouped together again, now that James had surely seen the supposed truth about Severus Snape. Lily scowled darkly, wondering how he could be so easily swayed. One day he was beginning to be more mature and finally accept that she was with Severus, and the next he was ready to act as if none of that mattered.

"Hey, Lily," James cheekily greeted her as he purposefully messed up his hair, Lily noticed.

"Hey, yourself," Lily practically spat back. "Give it up, will you, Potter? The last thing your hair needs is to be messed up further. If anything, I'd say you need to run a comb through it and maybe even use a charm to keep it permanently in place."

"Geez, Lily, what's the problem?" Potter asked, actually having the nerve to sound slightly put out.

Lily sighed. She knew he liked her, but she wasn't in the mood to deal with his boyish tendencies. "I need to talk to Black," she said pointedly.

"Whatever it is, you can say it in front of all of us," Potter argued, now clearly annoyed.

"I'm going down to breakfast," Lupin muttered. "C'mon, Peter." He pulled gently on his friend's sleeve, and the two boys left the common room, although Pettigrew had to stupidly look over his shoulder.

"What d'you want, Evans?" Black asked tiredly, as if Lily was an errant fly needing brushed away.

"Fine!" Lily exclaimed. "Since you're so thick-headed, Potter, you can stay, but this is between us," she said, indicating Black and herself.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Potter replied, "Fine, whatever."

"I supposed you've come to defend your precious Sniv-" Black started to say, but Lily cut him off.

"You will *not* call him that horrible name ever again," she hissed. "I know what he did to you, Black, and I'm not excusing his behavior, but what you did to provoke him was very low. I just so happened to see his file yesterday when I went to the infirmary, and I was disgusted to see how many times he'd been sent to the infirmary because of you." Glaring hotly at both boys, Lily's rage was fueled to continue. "You had no right to talk that way to Severus, especially after he's just lost his mother. Maybe you don't have a mother who loves you, but his mum was one of the few people in his life who ever gave a damn about him. Just because you don't understand what kind of life he's led doesn't mean it's okay for you to treat him as if he's worth nothing. He's a person. A person with feelings."

"Oh, poor Sniv- er, Snape has had a hard life, has he?" Black questioned, truly angry. "If what you say is true, that his mum at least loved him, then that's one thing he has... had... that I never did. You and James don't know what it's like to grow up in a family full of Dark wizards. My parents support You-Know-Who and are tickled pink that Regulus is growing up to follow in their footsteps. I was never wanted in their house, and that's why I moved out at sixteen. Yes, Evans, that's right. Only because of James here and his kind parents did I have a place to go. So, don't give me that rubbish, that Snape is the only one who's had it hard."

"But at least you've had friends... I mean, real friends," Lily countered. "The four of you have been inseparable since day one at Hogwarts. Do you *really* think those bastards who revelled in tormenting Severus earlier this year, the same ones who he used to call his friends, were ever really his friends? No! No, they weren't. I didn't know about your family life so much, Black, and I'm sorry it's been

rough for you, but maybe... maybe instead of fighting Severus, you all ought to try and get along? I don't mean you have to be friends, but he wants nothing more to do with the Death Eaters and what they stand for than you both do."

Lily, having intended to simply give Sirius a good verbal lashing, found that her initial fury was abating. She knew it was unlikely Severus and the Marauders would ever reconcile, but she had to hope.

"You're kidding, surely?" Black asked incredulously.

"I think she's serious, mate," Potter said frankly. Looking directly at Lily, Potter continued, "If what you're saying is true, it's going to take more than you telling me to convince me, Lily. I even tried to give Snape the benefit of the doubt, and it only drove a wedge between Sirius and me... and then Snape attacks my best mate. How am I supposed to take that?"

Lily understood his point, and it was fair. She was too emotionally involved to see things objectively, but being a reasonable enough person, Lily conceded, "Fine, then Severus will have to just prove it to you that he's not the evil person you seem to think he is... and I have no doubt he will... especially since he already has." Lily found it difficult to speak with as much conviction as she wanted. As much as she cared for and loved him, Lily was still apprehensive about his use of Dark Magic, and trying to convince his adversaries to see the Light in him was no easy task, especially with the latest events.

"Snape hasn't proven anything except that he's still just as capable of being a Dark wizard as before," Black stated contemptuously. "If slicing me open several times doesn't convince you, Evans, then you must be under a really strong Confundus Spell."

"And you just conveniently forgot that he also promptly healed you?" Lily questioned. "He didn't mean to attack you like that. He lost control because *you* provoked him!"

"Right," Black grounded out harshly. "You keep telling yourself that, and maybe you'll actually believe it."

"That's enough, mate," Potter said repressively. Looking back at Lily, he said, "I don't know why you're so intent on defending him, but for your sake, I'll leave him alone... see if that does any good and if he actually gives us a reason to believe what you say."

"Thank you, Pot- James," Lily replied, grateful he was trying. "And what about you?" she asked, looking at Black.

"I owe you nothing, Evans. I'm not infatuated with you like James here, so I have no reason to bow to your demands. But-" he glanced momentarily at James, noticing that his friend was giving him a pointed look. "But for his sake, because he's my best friend, I'll lay off the sorry bastard." He sighed. "C'mon, James, let's go."

Sirius walked toward the door, his pride seemingly deflated entirely. His slumped shoulders were not characteristic of him. James frowned at his friend's retreating form and looked back at Lily.

"I hope you know what you're doing," he said grimly and followed his friend.

Lily left the common room a couple of minutes later, relieved that she had spoken some sense into James and Sirius. She made her way down to the Great Hall, wondering if she would see Severus there. Breakfast passed, and she didn't see him. Growing worried, Lily left the Great Hall and headed toward the guest wing. She had told him yesterday that she needed time, but now, as she approached his door, she worried that he might have taken what she had said the wrong way.

Knocking gently on his door, Lily was at least glad it was Sunday, so they had all day to talk if need be. From inside his room, Severus was lying on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He heard the knocks, but chose to ignore them.

Go away, Lily. You don't really want to be here.

"Sev," Lily's voice then came from behind the door. "Open up. I know you're in there."

"I'm fine, Lily," he snapped. "I don't need anything."

"Open up, Severus," Lily stated, obviously ignoring his request.

"And what if I said no?" Severus replied, perhaps more harshly than he had intended.

Just as Lily feared, he had taken her words the wrong way. It hadn't mattered that she had parted with a gentle kiss bestowed to his forehead, a simple promise that she wasn't abandoning him. Severus had spent the past several hours brooding within the confines of his bedroom, believing he hadn't changed for the better at all, believing he had driven Lily away.

"Then I would say you're an even bigger idiot than I realized," Lily said heatedly.

There was a bang, and the door was open. Lily's wand was out as she entered, and Severus sat up, shocked she had used magic to gain entrance. If she wanted something, she would get it.

"Lily, what the bloody hell do you think you're doing?" Severus asked, standing up.

He went to the door and slammed it shut. Folding his arms over his chest, he stood rigid and mustered the best glare he could. Trying to use his height advantage to be imposing, he looked down his nose at Lily, much in the way he had at students when he had been a professor.

"Oh, drop the act, Severus," Lily said exasperatedly. "You don't scare me."

"Really?" he inquired darkly. "I was under the impression yesterday that you were feeling quite the opposite."

"Severus, what's the matter with you?" Lily asked, hurt. "Of course I was shocked by what happened, but what did you expect? You should know better by now than to think I'd just up and leave you! Have a little more faith in yourself, in me, in *us*!"

"In... us?" Severus asked, his wall breaking. No matter how much he tried to be cold, he couldn't, not toward Lily. He didn't have to

completely dissolve into an emotional spring of watery emotion, however.

Relieved to hear his voice giving in, Lily stepped closer and placed a hand on his forearm, right over the part which had been branded with the Dark Mark in another life. Severus shuddered, but he didn't uncross his arms. His shoulders relaxed slightly.

"Yes, in us, Sev," Lily said gently, looking intently into his black eyes, searching his soul for understanding.

Severus finally relented and unfolded his arms, going to the bed and sinking into it. He sighed and buried his face in his hands. "I'm such a fool," he muttered.

Lily took a seat next to him and rubbed small circles into his back. "Maybe," she said softly, "but a fool who I love."

Severus withdrew his face from his hand and stared at her. "You're unbelievable," he breathed. "You're too good to be true. You're..." *...the only good I have.*

Lily shook her head. "No, Sev. This is real, but you must understand that... that I'm not the only one on your side. I just got done talking with Potter and Black, and they've agreed to give you a chance."

Furrowing his brow, Severus responded negatively, "I don't need or want their sympathy simply because you've asked them for it. I don't believe they would offer it otherwise."

Lily knew this was a sore subject for him, but she had no idea the depth to which Severus took it. He was still trying learn in this life what it was to let go of a deeply-embedded grudge, a grudge he had taken pleasure in taking out on Harry Potter. Thinking about it now, feeling forced into changing something that had consumed a large part of his life, both then and now, Severus wasn't ready to let it go... not yet, at least. Not even Lily could make him see reason at the moment, and so, Severus was being foolish when he said, "If that's what you came here to say, Lily, you can leave now. I've got the message, plain and clear."

Hurt by the sudden coldness in his voice, Lily withdrew her hand from his back. "Surely you don't mean that," she said, on the verge of tears. She had tried so hard to fight for him, and this was the thanks she got?

Severus, refusing to say anything, turned away. Lily stood and left quickly, a chilling breeze left in her wake, and the door slammed, shattering what little hope Severus had left.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Well, you've done it now, Severus. You're finally managed to drive Lily away, in spite of the promises she made to stay by your side, Severus thought bitterly.

Similar thoughts had gone through his mind the past few days since Lily and he had last spoken. He couldn't blame her for leaving, and while there was a time he would have almost believed her when she said she would never leave him, he knew the truth now. His existence, no matter what lifetime, was not meant for happiness. James Potter hated him for existing, and the more Severus thought about it, the more he realized how much his adversary might be right. Who would want someone so loathsome?

During the past week, Avery had made it his new mission to try and befriend Severus again. Seeing Severus full of hatred, the other boy was no doubt feeding on the opportunity, on Severus's vulnerability.

"Sorry about your mum," Avery had murmured to his old friend one day in Charms.

Severus had glared suspiciously at the other Slytherin. "Why would *you* care, Avery?" Severus had hissed.

Avery had shrugged. "Hey, I've got a mum, too, you know. I wouldn't want to lose her."

Frowning, Severus had ignored him and had turned back to his note-taking.

Now, it was Saturday, and Severus was serving his weekly detention for cursing Sirius Black. Dumbledore had assigned him to work outside with Hagrid on the grounds, and since it was a nice spring day, Severus felt it hardly a punishment. It was a chance to get away from the confines of the castle and get some fresh air and try to think about things.

What was Avery playing at? Severus knew better than to think Avery had no ulterior motives. While Avery's wide face had looked sincere enough, there had been a gleam in his blue eyes that Severus didn't

like. Avery had not mentioned Mulciber or their attack on Severus months earlier. He had only tried to get Severus to study with him again, saying he missed his old friend.

"That's rubbish," Severus muttered to himself while weeding the vegetable garden Hagrid had behind his cabin.

Off in the distance, Severus noticed other students outside enjoying the pleasant weather. He couldn't make out who any of them were, but he wondered if Lily was among them. She had other friends she could hang around now that she was no longer with him, and as his thoughts turned even more sour, Severus wondered if Lily had latched onto Potter yet.

It's just like last time, he thought angrily, his resentment growing. Nothing's changed, and it was only a matter of time before I bolloxed up again.

Severus pulled the weeds with more ferocity, caged rage released with each rough tug. He knew he had made a mistake, but that was all it had been this time... and last time, even though he hadn't separated himself from those who had influenced him. How could Lily just turn her back on him like that, so easily? Her words were nothing but empty promises, and the fact she had chosen Potter, of all people, last time was another stab to the heart. Just because she wasn't with him didn't mean she had to choose his enemy!

As upset as he was becoming at Lily, though, he could never stop loving her, and maybe that was his weakness, he figured darkly. To not care, to not love, to not feel so damn much was preferable to being plagued with every raw emotion he felt so deeply. Throwing the weeds aside in a fit, Severus glared at the rest, mocking him to pull them, to kill them as well.

His walls needed to be rebuilt, then. He couldn't let his emotions take hold of him any longer. Resuming his chore, Severus pulled every weed infesting the garden. He was about to go find Hagrid when the grounds keeper's voice echoed, "Yeh finished, Mr. Snape?"

"Yes," Severus said tersely. "Is that the end of detention?"

"Act'lly," Hagrid replied, "since yeh finished the weedin' so quickly, yeh still have some time ter spare. Come with me ter the forest. I've got some thestrals I've bin keepin' an eye on. New baby an' all. Yeh can come with an' help me feed 'em."

Severus glowered, but complied. Carrying a bucket of raw meat, Severus followed the half-giant into the forest. After some time, they came to a clearing, and Severus saw them... those darkly beautiful creatures.

"I suppose yeh can see 'em?" Hagrid asked gruffly. Before Severus could respond, Hagrid nodded, saying, "Yeah, I suppose yeh can, what with losin' yer mum an' all. Sorry 'bout that, by the way."

"Don't be," Severus muttered, looking around for the baby thestral. Hagrid apparently didn't know the details of his mother's death. While Severus hadn't actually witnessed her demise, he had seen enough death firsthand in his other life to account for being able to see thestrals, but he wasn't about to tell Hagrid that.

Hagrid didn't say anything further on the subject, for which Severus was grateful. Instead, Hagrid knelt on the forest floor and pulled out a hunk of meat, carefully holding it out to the baby, murmuring for the little thing to come closer.

Severus sighed and rolled his eyes. Hagrid always had a ridiculous soft spot for creatures, but at least thestrals were harmless. Feared, but harmless. Severus set the bucket down and removed a piece of meat, holding it as far away from himself as possible. He carefully approached one of the beasts that was a short distance away, coaxing it to come closer. The thestral eyed him warily, despite the welcoming meat in Severus's outstretched hand. Severus stepped closer to the animal, understanding dawning. He felt a strange comfort around them. Like him, these creatures were different and not understood, but they were not evil.

The thestral finally approached Severus and sniffed the meat, then licked it, its rough tongue scratching Severus's hand. He smiled slightly at the animal and dropped the meat, watching as it proceeded to fiercely devour the treat.

Severus glanced around, noticing he could no longer see Hagrid. Either he had walked too far in pursuing the thestral, or Hagrid had moved as well. Severus didn't panic, though. He knew the forest well enough, and contrary to what the students were taught, it wasn't filled with as many truly dangerous creatures as they were made to believe.

Maybe there weren't too many dangerous creatures, but dangerous people were another matter. Severus was in the middle of petting the thestral between the ears when he heard a twig snap, and before he could react, someone had Stunned him. He felt himself go rigid, and unable to cry out for help, Severus mentally berated himself for being so stupid as to not have his wand out.

As moment ago, he had been at peace with the thestral, and now, he was at the mercy of someone who had ill intent for him. His black unmoving eyes gazed up at the canopy of trees, at the brilliant sunlight filtering through, and at the blue sky beyond. Then, he saw a face come into view. Avery.

"Hello, Snape," Avery said conversationally. "I see you fancied a nice stroll into the forest just like we did."

We?

Within seconds, Rosier and Wilkes were there next to Avery.

"We have someone we'd like you to meet," Avery continued. "C'mon, mates. Let's get him out of here before someone notices."

With a growing sense of dread, Severus closed his eyes, feeling his body being compressed as he was Disapparated along with his old friends. He knew who he would see when he opened his eyes, and with everything dear, he willed himself to be brave, to see two comforting green eyes instead of two malevolent red.

He opened his eyes, but it wasn't red that greeted him. Having forgotten what Voldemort had looked like before his resurrection, Severus now was looking at hazel eyes that held just as much evil as the red they would become. He thought he could see a red glint in Voldemort's eyes as the Dark Lord addressed him.

"Ah, welcome, Severus Snape," Voldemort said smoothly. "Your friends have told me much about you."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

"Ah, welcome, Severus Snape," Voldemort said smoothly. "Your friends have told me much about you."

A part of Severus wanted to sneer, "Oh, really?", but he kept his mouth shut. He had nothing pleasant to say to this murdering, evil overlord who stood in front of him. If Severus's friends thought they were doing him a favor, they couldn't have been more wrong. His days of hiding his emotions behind Occlumency and pretending to be a loyal Death Eater were done, forever, and he had no inclination to return to them.

Severus simply glared at Voldemort defiantly, making sure to block his memories of his past life.

"I sense much anger and darkness inside of you, young Snape," Voldemort said, smirking slightly. "Your friends have obliged me with the details of your tragic life thus far and how the recent loss of your dear mother fueled a raging attack upon another student. I know of your knowledge and skill with the Dark Arts. Someone like you would be a valuable asset to the fold, and I promise you, you would be amply rewarded."

Severus knew it was pointless, but he tried to Disapparate regardless. He couldn't spend another moment looking to the face of the man who had murdered him (and so many) and who he had foolishly served before. This was one mistake he wasn't going to make again, no matter how messed up the rest of his life became.

"Like hell," Severus whispered.

"What's that, Snape?" Voldemort asked, his voice hinted with malice, on edge to strike.

"You heard me," Severus ground out. "Like hell you would reward me."

Voldemort released a high-pitched, cruel laugh into the air. "Such spirit. So furious and bitter at such a young age." He laughed some more, but then sobered, hissing, "And trying to Disapparate? You

little imbecile! Do you not think I wouldn't be prepared for such things? I can't have people simply vanishing whenever they wish to depart."

Severus's hand was grasping hopelessly for his wand, which he knew had been taken from him upon his arrival. If he had it, he would have felt marginally safer, and doing wandless magic was draining. He closed his eyes, ignoring those around him, willing himself to escape. He might not be able to Apparate, but there were other means...

Just then, he felt his left arm being roughly grabbed and his sleeve being forced up. He struggled and tried to pull away, but to no avail. Opening his eyes, he saw the tip of the Dark Lord's wand an inch from his unmarked skin.

No, no, no... Then, his thoughts became vocalized. "No, no, no," he muttered wildly. His heart was pumping quickly, and adrenaline was coursing through him. "No!" he bellowed, somehow finding the strength to pull his arm away.

Everything happened so fast. Severus began running in the opposite direction, knowing he wouldn't escape if he kept merely running. He was severely outnumbered. Thankfully, they were gathered outside in a thick forest, and so, Severus closed his eyes, thinking of the first thing that would give him the power to do what he must... Lily. He felt his feet lifting off the ground, and as he ascended, he released a triumphal laugh.

He'd done it! He was flying!

"Accio my wand!" he shouted, and the Death Eater who was holding Severus's wand stood in stupid shock as he watched the ebony piece of wood fly out of his hand and toward the flying man.

"You fools!" Voldemort shouted. "What are you just standing around for? Get him!"

Now that he had his wand, Severus felt more confident in his abilities. He hastened his speed and disappeared into the canopy of trees, but flashes of light from spell after spell and shouts of frustration followed in his wake. He didn't dare look back, lest he lose his concentration

and hit a tree. Finally, he was free of the forest and was soaring above the trees, leaving Voldemort and his followers behind.

His heart still thudding in his ears, Severus felt the adrenaline slowly begin to wear off. He had escaped! It seemed too easy, though. One thing he could thank the Dark Lord for was teaching him how to fly, and that wasn't an ability Voldemort had acquired until after his resurrection. Few wizards could pull off a feat like that, but he had already used it to escape from Hogwarts when the teachers had turned against him. Feeling exhausted from the sheer amount of power it had taken to do wandless magic, Severus surveyed his surroundings and found a safe place to land. He closed his eyes and tried to regain some of his strength. Feeling drained, he leaned against a tree. He would need to wait a little while before Apparating back to the Forbidden Forest.

Knowing how close he had come to being marked again, Severus reflected on why that had happened. He had perhaps come too close mentally to turning to the Dark side again in his life. Lately, his relationship with Lily was almost nonexistent, and he knew he was throwing away his chance at life.

*What is wrong with me? What am I doing with myself and to others?
This isn't how it was supposed to be!*

Now he had the added problem of having made an open enemy of Voldemort. When he hadn't been face-to-face with his killer, Severus could go about his life without too much thought about the Dark Lord, but now all of that had changed. He had told Dumbledore that the war didn't concern him, that he wanted to live his life and be left alone, but was that realistic? The unfortunate reality was that Voldemort now knew his name and face, and Voldemort never forgot those who so openly defied him.

The weight of everything was settling in, and Severus's momentary euphoria at escaping the Dark Lord was gone. The only thing he could have done that would have enraged the Dark Lord more toward him would have been if he had tried to kill him, but Severus knew the Dark Lord had protection against being so easily killed.

Gathering himself, Severus stood and Disapparated. When he opened his eyes, he was back in the forest near the thestrals. He looked around for Hagrid, but the half-giant was no where in sight.

"Hagrid!" Severus called out.

Hagrid appeared from behind some trees, clearly worried and upset. "Where have yeh bin, Snape?" he demanded. "I was lookin' all over for yeh!"

"No time to explain right now, Hagrid," Severus replied impatiently, forgetting he was a student. "I need to see the headmaster."

"I'd say yeh did," Hagrid said gruffly. "Runnin' off like that durin' detention. Dumbledore's not gonna be happy."

Severus followed Hagrid back to the grounds. When they arrived at Hagrid's cabin, Hagrid asked suspiciously, "D'you need me to go with yeh?"

"No, I'll be fine, thank you," Severus said curtly.

Without another word, he made his way back to the castle. He would talk to Dumbledore, but first, he had someone more important he needed to see. He sought out the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"I need to see Lily Evans," he demanded.

"You're not a Gryffindor, young man," the Fat Lady sniffed distainfully.

"I'm quite aware of that," Severus replied hotly. "But this is important."

"Oh, it's always important, isn't it?" the Fat Lady replied. "Do you have any idea how many students come here, bothering me incessantly, asking to be allowed in?"

Severus was about to say he didn't care, but then the entrance swung open, and as a couple of second years stepped out, Severus pushed his way past them, not caring if he knocked them over, and rushed into the Gryffindor common room.

"Young man!" Severus heard the portrait exclaiming indignantly as it closed. Whatever the Fat Lady said after that was lost.

Severus's arrival was met with looks of shock and cries of outrage from several Gryffindors.

"What's *he* doing in here?"

"You're not allowed!"

"This the *Gryffindor* common room!"

"Severus?" he heard a sweet voice ask.

Ignoring all the protests and scornful remarks, Severus made his way toward Lily and grabbed her by the hand.

"You must come with me, Lily," he said.

Lily, noting the urgency in his voice, replied, a little afraid by his actions, "All- all right."

Glad the Marauders weren't around, Severus and Lily left the common room and found their broom closet.

"Sev, you're breathing awfully heavily," Lily said, concerned. "You look a right mess. What's the matter?"

Before he would say anything, Severus engulfed Lily in a rib-crushing embrace. "I'm never, ever, ever going to let you go," he said, his voice raw and despondent. "Lily, I'm sorry, so sorry, for everything I've done."

His apology was all-encompassing. Severus wasn't just apologizing for his recent stubbornness and coldness. He was sorry for his rejection and betrayal of her in his past life, which had ultimately led to her death, and coming fact-to-face with Voldemort today had reminded him of how precious Lily was to him. He would not lose her. Not again.

Not ever.

Feeling Lily's arms come around him and holding him just as tightly, he thought his heart might give out when she breathed into his ear, "There's nothing to forgive, Sev. Didn't I tell you I'd never leave you? I meant that, Sev; I meant that."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Severus and Lily stayed locked together in their shared embrace for a long time in that broom closet, no more words exchanged. Severus felt a huge burden had been lifted from his shoulders, and he knew without a doubt now that Lily meant what she said: She would never leave him.

And he never would leave her.

"Goodness, Sev, what happened?" Lily whispered into his ear after some time.

Swallowing, Severus readied himself and replied, "I was serving detention with Hagrid in the forest. Avery, Rosier, and Wilkes caught me off guard and took me to him."

Lily's eyes grew huge with shock and fear. "Him?" she asked in a small voice. "You mean, You-Know-Who?"

"Yes, him," Severus said grimly.

"My God, you must have been frightened to death," Lily breathed, clutching his hand tightly. "And then what happened? How did you escape?"

"They thought it would be a good idea to recruit me," Severus stated bitterly, reminded of his willingness to join last time without much provocation. "The Dark- er, he tried to brand me as one of his followers with his mark. I got away just in time."

Realizing how close he had come to slipping, Severus knew he needed to be careful. Lily wouldn't understand his referring to Voldemort as the Dark Lord. She was, however, giving him a quizzical look.

"His mark?" she questioned. "How do you know about that?"

"I know enough; trust me, Lily," Severus said repressively, hoping she wouldn't ask for more details. "You forget that my house is full of

wizards wishing to follow You-Know-Who. Anyway, the point is... I'm not one of them."

"I know you're not, Sev," Lily said softly, wondering if he was trying to convince her or himself. "But you didn't answer my other question. How did you escape? It's not every day that someone manages a feat like that."

"I, uh, flew."

"What, on a broom? How'd you manage to have a broom with you?"

"No, not with a broom." Severus wished she would stop with the questions. He had learned how to fly from Voldemort, after all, and it wasn't a skill he intended to use unless absolutely necessary.

"You never told me you could fly," Lily breathed in awe.

"It's not something I want known," Severus explained. As much as he wanted to stay with Lily, he was growing weary of her questions and feeling horrible for not being able to answer them completely honestly, but how could he tell her the truth? Severus sighed, knowing he would need to tell Dumbledore about Avery and his friends.

"I suppose I ought to see the headmaster before too much time passes," Severus said.

Lily nodded with understanding. "You're right. The thought of those Death Eaters running around the school..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "I'm glad you didn't join them, Sev... more than glad."

Standing, Severus offered Lily a hand to help her up, and when she was standing next to him, Severus reached for her hand and held it, simultaneously holding his gaze into her eyes.

"Never, I'll never join them," he said firmly. With one last squeeze of the hand and a quick kiss, Severus left the broom closet and began heading toward the headmaster's office.

As he walked, Severus shuddered at how close he had come today to reliving his Death Eater days. It was true that he hadn't sought out

the group this time around, but being branded with the Dark Mark would have made him a Death Eater all the same, no matter how much he didn't want to be one. He wondered if his behavior since losing his mother had led him down this path, had almost, unknowingly, driven him away from Lily once again and toward the Dark side. Forcing those thoughts down, Severus knew he would need to be calm and level-headed when he spoke with Dumbledore.

Now, standing outside the office, Severus realized he didn't know the password. He frowned at the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the revolving staircase and said, "Dumbledore would be expecting me. I don't suppose you'll just let me in, though, will you?"

Strangely enough, the gargoyle nodded and leapt aside, granting Severus passage. Severus stepped onto the first step and was taken to the door. He knocked only once, not saying a word, and the door was beckoned open by a grave Dumbledore.

"Ah, Mr. Snape, I was expecting you. In fact, I have been expecting you for some time now. Have a seat and tell me the reason for your disappearance during detention with Hagrid this afternoon."

Severus noticed the use of his surname and the formal tones in which the headmaster spoke. He supposed it didn't help that he had already been serving detention when he had disappeared, making it look like he was simply running off, not caring about his punishment. Dumbledore was seated behind his desk, and so, Severus took the seat in front of the desk.

"Fine, I'll get right to the point, then," Severus stated. "The truth, sir, is that I was forcefully taken by Death Eaters to You-Know-Who."

For a moment, Dumbledore regarded Severus shrewdly, but then he spoke, strangely gently, "I trust you are indeed telling me the truth, Severus?"

Hearing his first name being used to address him and the tone of Dumbledore's voice, Severus relaxed a little into the chair. He nodded. "Yes, sir. I wouldn't dare joke about something this serious. It was... Avery, Rosier, and Wilkes. You can see for yourself. May I extract the memory?"

Hoping this would prove sufficient, as Severus still didn't feel comfortable with Dumbledore having access to his mind, Severus waited. Dumbledore acquiesced. "That will do, Severus. Whenever you are ready."

Thinking it odd that Dumbledore didn't ask any further questions, Severus removed the memory from his mind and placed it into the Pensieve. Dumbledore stood and gazed down into the contents, then looked at Severus. "Do you care to come with me?"

"Why?" Severus asked. "I already lived through it once."

"Very well, I shall be right back, then."

Severus watched as Dumbledore disappeared into the contents. A few minutes later, the headmaster was back inside the office, looking upon Severus with an expression Severus couldn't discern. He motioned for Severus to retrieve his memory, and Severus did so.

Dumbledore smiled slightly, but his eyes twinkled with a gentle sadness. "I apologize, my boy," he spoke in tones of admiration and sorrow, "for underestimating you all these years. You are by far much braver than most. After everything you've endured... and yet, you still refused to give in to the Dark side, Severus. Remarkable, simply remarkable."

Severus's breathing was shallow as he tried to keep the emotion out of his voice when he replied, "Do you have *any* idea how long I've wished to hear those words from you and for you to mean them?"

No, he thought. How could you? You know nothing of my other life... of how much I fucked up and how close I came this time...

Dumbledore gazed into Severus's eyes. "Is there... Severus, is there something more you need to share with me?"

"Sir, I-" He forced himself to stop and shook his head. The risk was too large. He couldn't tell Dumbledore or anyone. His shields back in place, Severus said harshly, "I suppose you'll make sure Avery and his friends aren't allowed back in the school?"

"Of course," Dumbledore replied. "You won't have to worry about the likes of them accosting you again at Hogwarts, but you do realize that you have made yourself a grave enemy today, have you not, Severus?"

"Of course I have," Severus spat, now annoyed. He didn't need Dumbledore telling him the obvious. The repercussions of his actions were starting to sink in, and Severus wondered how much longer he could hide from the inevitable. There was a war looming, and while he was no coward, as he had told Dumbledore before, he wanted no part in this war. To Dumbledore, to Lily, to everyone else, though, they had no idea what he had already sacrificed. Only he knew the magnitude of his choices, both past and present.

"And you are all right? No physical harm was done to you?"

"Physically, I'm fine." Refusing to elaborate further, Severus asked, "May I go now?"

"Yes, Severus, you may."

Standing, Severus made his way toward the door, but just as he was about to leave, Dumbledore said, "You never told me you could fly."

"There are a lot of things I don't tell people," Severus muttered, then left.

Once the door was closed, Dumbledore was left thinking that he now had a powerful wizard on his side.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

While Severus was speaking with Dumbledore, Lily returned to the Gryffindor common room, where she was greeted immediately by James upon stepping into the room.

"Hey, Lily," he said, "what's this I hear about Snape coming into our common room? Everyone's been talking about it for the past hour."

Sighing, Lily sank into one of the cushioned armchairs near the fireplace. "It's just what you said. Severus came into the common room, yes."

Knowing she wouldn't get away without further explanation, Lily wasn't surprised when James queried, "And do you want to tell me why?"

He took a seat across from Lily, and she frowned at him. Glancing around, she didn't see Sirius, Lupin, or Pettigrew around. "Your friends aren't with you?" she asked quietly.

"No," he said.

"Fine," she gave in. "It was..." Lily stopped, wondering how much she should tell him, if anything. It really wasn't her story to tell, but news would get around the school soon enough that Avery, Wilkes, and Rosier had been expelled. "Severus was serving detention with Hagrid in the forest and was abducted by his old friends... You know, Avery and them. They took him to You-Know-Who."

"You're kidding?" James asked incredulously, leaning forward.

Shaking her head seriously, Lily said, "I wish I was, but no, I'm not."

"And Snape escaped, or did he join him?" James questioned, both shock and apprehension in his voice, on the edge of his seat now.

"He didn't join them, James," Lily replied firmly. "He escaped, and now he's talking with Dumbledore."

"Blimey," James breathed, slouching back into the chair. "That's just..." He couldn't finish his sentence. Not long ago, he had agreed to leave Severus alone for Lily's sake, and while there was a time when he would have doubted Severus's ability to turn from the Dark Arts, he had to admit now that he was wrong about the other boy. Oddly, James felt a sense of relief, whether for Lily or for Severus, he couldn't be sure.

"No wonder he's such a rude git," James remarked.

"Ja- Potter!" Lily exclaimed, annoyed. "That's not a kind thing to say!"

"No, no, you don't understand," James argued. "I meant... he's the way he is because his life is so messed up."

Lily couldn't be sure, but she thought she heard guilt creeping into James's voice. "Feeling badly for how you and your friends have mistreated him all these years?" she jibed.

James shifted uncomfortably in the chair and pulled at his collar as if he was hot. "Maybe," he muttered, standing up and leaving.

Lily smirked at his retreating form, a pride in being right glowing inside.

Times have really changed, she reflected. Severus won't have to worry about those horrible Slytherins next year, and Potter and his friends may finally leave him alone.

Deep down, Lily hoped Severus would be more open to making new friends, although she had a difficult time imagining him ever being truly friends with the Marauders. Allies would be a better word, but if she could come to see that both Severus and James had changed, perhaps the two stubborn young men would see that in each other as well.

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Severus's sixth year at Hogwarts finally drew to an end. Without Avery and his friends around, Severus felt confident he would be left alone, and even though he wasn't sure what to expect from the

Marauders, they continued to not bother him, either. Talk of what had happened to him spread throughout the castle, and many younger students looked up at him with something akin to awe in their eyes. With a new-found confidence, Severus held his head a little higher and didn't lean forward with his shoulders rounded when he walked. He had never known what it felt like to be admired, and while no one actually said anything to him, he was all the happier for it, as he was a man who didn't want to be bothered by the general public, whether for good or ill.

The train ride home was overall pleasant and eventless. Thankful to have a compartment alone with Lily, Severus spent much of the ride with her leaning against him and his arms protectively holding her. Together, they watched as trees and houses went by, and the landscapes would change every so often.

"Just one year left," Lily murmured sleepily.

"Mmm," Severus said, not bothering to move his lips. He was completely relaxed and didn't feel like making the effort to speak properly. All thoughts of the past several weeks had been pushed out of his mind, and he was allowing himself to simply enjoy basking in Lily's company for a while longer.

"I love you, Sev," Lily said softly, then yawned.

Placing a gentle kiss on the top of her head, Severus returned, "Love you, Lily."

He closed his eyes, which had been drooping closer and closer to being shut, and slipped into a peaceful slumber. Lily did likewise, lulled by the rhythmic motion of his chest and by the steady beat of his heart and by the warmth of the sun on her face.

The sounds of excited voices, of people walking down the aisle outside the compartment, of doors opening, and general movement about the train woke both Severus and Lily hours later.

"Well, it looks like we've arrived," Lily remarked, standing up and stretching.

Severus stood and helped her with her bags. He exited the train with Lily at his side, knowing he had no parents there to greet him. Arrangements had already been made to have Lily's parents drive Severus home. He remembered seeing his mother here a year ago, and his earlier contentment dissolved when he realized he would never see her again.

Noticing the slightly sad look on Severus's face, Lily asked, "You okay, Sev?"

Shaking his head out of the daze, Severus forced a smile. "Fine, Lily... just thinking about the past." Seeing Lily's parents, Severus quickly changed the subject, "There they are. Let's go."

Lily wished he would have opened up more, but they were in public, and now was not the right time or place, she realized. With a small sigh, she followed Severus toward her parents, noticing Petunia wasn't with them.

Mrs. Evans hugged her daughter tightly, saying, "Oh, Lily, dear! We've missed you so much! It'll be so nice to have you home for the summer. Petunia's sorry she couldn't be here..."

Yeah, right, Lily thought, regarding what her mother had said about Petunia.

Severus's mouth quirked on one side a little as he watched the over-affectionate mother smothering her beloved daughter. He exchanged an amused glance with Mr. Evans, who greeted Severus and shook his hand.

"I trust the both of you had a safe journey, Severus?" Mr. Evans posed.

"Yes, sir, it was fine," Severus replied, still distracted by the scene going between Mrs. Evans and her daughter.

When Mrs. Evans heard Severus speaking, her tight grip on Lily loosened, and before Lily could take a breath and say anything, she watched in mild horror as her mother proceeded to latch onto Severus and embrace him.

"Oh, Severus," Mrs. Evans giggled. "It's so good to see you. How are you holding up, dear boy?" The woman kept prattling on and on for what felt like far too long, and Severus only awkwardly returned the hug when he realized she wasn't letting go anytime soon.

"I, uh..." Severus said, dazed and embarrassed. Once he was free of Mrs. Evans's vice grip, he quickly scurried to Lily's side and grabbed the bags.

Lily giggled, casting an apologetic look in Severus's direction. They headed for the car and loaded everything in, and the long journey home began. If it wasn't for Lily's parents in the front seat, Severus wouldn't have had any qualms about Lily resting her head on his chest like on the train, but they didn't have the luxury of having that same privacy any longer.

As they neared their neighborhood, Mr. Evans asked, "Severus, do you want us to drop you off at home, or did you want to come over first for dinner? You're welcome either way."

Shrugging, Severus said to Lily, "What do you think?"

"Come to dinner first, Sev," she said, convincing him immediately.

"There's your answer," Severus told Lily's father.

Content with his decision, Severus joined the Evanses for dinner. Just like at Christmas, Petunia talked hardly at all and wouldn't even so much as look at Lily. Lily tried not to let her sister's cold indifference get to her, but that was proving difficult. After the meal was finished, Lily watched as Petunia hurried away from the table and up the stairs.

"Nice seeing you, too, Petunia!" Lily called sarcastically after her.

"Petunia, darling, won't you stay and have dessert?" Mrs. Evans asked loudly.

There was no reply but the sound of footsteps up the stairs. Sighing, Mrs. Evans remarked, "I don't understand why she's been so distant."

"Even when I'm not around?" Lily questioned, her brow creased with concern.

"Don't worry about it, Lily," her mother said kindly, clearing the table. "You two just enjoy yourselves."

Lily, however, wasn't satisfied. Dessert was a subdued affair, and afterward, Lily and Severus were standing on the front porch in their usual spot. It was a beautiful summer evening: a clear sky and a light, mild breeze. Lily reached for Severus's hands, and he held hers deftly, gazing down into her eyes.

"Lily?" he asked softly.

"Maybe I'm just being overly sensitive and stupid," Lily muttered, "but Petunia... Sev, she's my sister, and she won't even talk to me." Her voice wavered a little, and Severus watched as her lip trembled.

He drew her close and wrapped her in his arms. "It's not your fault, Lily," he murmured into her hair. "If she can't accept what and who you are, that's her problem."

"But she makes it my problem," Lily said, unconvinced. "She makes it feel like I have to choose, Sev... you or her. It shouldn't have to be this way."

Severus swallowed down the guilty feeling in his throat. He clearly recalled how nasty he had been toward Petunia on several occasions when he had been younger, even as a child. Of course, Petunia had been just as mean back, but did that justify anything? The selfish part of him wanted to tell Lily that he was glad she had chosen him... and not just him over Petunia, but him over Potter.

Now that Lily was his, though, he felt it harder and harder to be possessive. Something inside him had shifted, and Severus could only suppose it was the effect of true reciprocated love. He wanted Lily to be happy, and if she was worried about her sister hating her, he found that angered him, too.

"How could she not like you, Lily?" Severus asked gently. "I'm not an experienced person when it comes to normal families, but she is your sister. You could still talk to her... She's not going anywhere."

Lily exhaled deeply. "Maybe, but maybe not. I don't know if I even want to bother, Sev..."

"Think about it, then," he said in what he hoped was a reassuring voice.

"All right," Lily gave in. "Whatever happens with this whole Petunia thing, I know you'll be there for me, Sev. At least I know I have you."

"You have me," Severus murmured, his hands stroking small circles in her back.

When they finally withdrew, Severus kissed her and bade her good night. The sun was just beginning to set, and he was feeling the exhaustion from the day's travels setting in, despite the sleep he'd gotten on the train.

Severus headed in the direction of his home on Spinner's End. When he reached the old playground where he had first met Lily, he stopped and reminisced. He could almost see his younger self hiding behind the bushes, all dirty and sweaty in his awkward clothes, watching with hungry desperation a lovely girl with flaming red hair that glistened in the sunlight. He could almost hear Lily's melodic laughter echoing off the surrounding canopy of trees. So many memories, both fond ones and sad ones.

Severus's eyes drifted from the swingset to the bench where his father would lay, and he remembered the shivering form of a pathetic and lost man last Christmas Eve. Where was his father living now? Severus scowled, wondering why he suddenly cared. Had Lily's loving parents and her sadness over a broken relationship with her sister touched home, made him think about his family?

Severus turned from the playground and began his trek home once again. When he was only a couple of houses away, however, he stopped. It seemed thoughts of his father had brought the man to him.

"Severus," Tobias said, truly surprised to see his son standing there. "I wondered if you might return home soon. You always came back at the end of June each year..."

"Father," Severus stated evenly, not sure what emotion he felt.

"I'm sorry... but I wanted to see you again. I still can't find home, but I know it's somewhere around here." Tobias was speaking without a slur, and he appeared clean.

"I see you're not drinking," Severus observed, impressed despite himself.

"Yes," Tobias replied hastily. "Look, Severus, what I said all those months ago was true. I hope your offer still stands - that you'll talk to me if I'm sober."

The bag Severus was holding was getting heavy, so he set it down. It was nearly dark by now, and he wondered if they would be disturbing the neighbors. Against his better judgment perhaps, Severus said, "Come with me."

Tobias didn't say anything, but only quietly followed his son a couple of houses. Severus paused and brought out his wand, murmuring strange words to Tobias's Muggle ears. In front of the older man's eyes, a house appeared.

"How- ?"

"Never mind that," Severus said shortly. "It's starting to cool down. Come in if you're so intent on talking with me, Father."

Tobias followed Severus up the path to the front door, and they entered. When his father's hand went for the light switch, Severus muttered, "Don't bother. The electricity isn't working anymore."

He kept his wand tip lit and went into the sitting room, where he pointed it at the grate, saying, "*Incendio!*"

Tobias jumped back in surprise. "Bloody hell!" he exclaimed. "I'd forgotten what you magical folk could do." Eyeing Severus's wand

warily, he added, "You're not going to, uh... do anything to me, are you?"

Sighing exasperatedly, Severus sat down in the armchair. "No, Father." He motioned for Tobias to sit on the couch. After the other man did so, Severus questioned, "So, what did you wish to say?"

Tobias nervously fidgeted with his fingers. Finally, he uttered, "That I'm sorry, Severus. I wanted to... I'm sorry about, about-" Tobias's voice trembled, and Severus heard his father choke back a sob.

Clearly uncomfortable, Severus allowed the man time to compose himself. The old Severus would have lost his temper at the first sign of weakness from the other man, but Severus was simply uneasy around his father now. He could place two ruined lifetimes of blame on the man who he called father if he wanted, but the thing was, he didn't want to do that.

Severus stood and left the room and returned with a glass of water, forcing it into Tobias's hands. Tobias took it graciously, his hands nervously fumbling to hold it, but he didn't drop it. He took a gulp of water and placed the glass on the table in front of him.

"I'm sorry," he said pitifully, embarrassed for crying.

"I know you are," Severus said carefully. "I believe your remorse is real, Father, but you have to understand that we're talking about years here. I can't just forget all that."

"I don't expect you to," Tobias replied.

"Then what do you want from me?" Severus asked.

"Your forgiveness."

Those two words were stated so plainly. Tobias's face was streaked with recent tears, and his voice was raw. Severus looked at him for a moment, then looked away. His father's face resembled his. It was too much like gazing in a mirror, his own reflection asking if he could forgive himself.

When Severus didn't say anything, Tobias heaved a great sigh. He made to stand, but Severus was quicker and stopped him.

"You don't have to go," Severus said softly, his eyes fixed on the floor.

"Then what am I to make of your silence, Severus?" Tobias asked despondently.

"It's... complicated, Dad."

Tobias felt his heart stop for a fleeting second. "You just... called me 'Dad.'"

The words had escaped Severus's mouth before he realized what he had said. "So it would seem," he replied. "It's just this, Father..." he said, making sure to use the formal address. "...forgiveness doesn't come easy. It will... take some time."

Tobias moved his lips like he was going to say something, but then he nodded. "I should be going," he stated, heading for the door. "This is your home now, not mine."

Severus just nodded and walked his father to the door. "I'll be seeing you around, then?" Severus asked, giving Tobias reason to hope.

A small smile tugged at Tobias's mouth as he stepped out the door. Just before closing the unwarded door, Severus heard two words stated so plainly:

"Thank you."

Chapter Forty

After Tobias left, Severus stood in the entrance to the sitting room for a while, simply staring. His eyes rested upon the couch where his father had spent years passed out after another drinking binge, and as his eyes travelled across the floor, he could easily imagine bottles strewn about it. When his eyes finally came to rest on the old television, Severus frowned. He had been meaning to dispose of the ridiculous thing for months now, so he decide first thing in the morning, it would be going to the dump heap.

With nothing else to do, Severus sighed and headed up to bed. He left his bag on the floor, too tired to deal with it. After changing into his nightclothes, he dropped onto the bed, welcoming its softness and familiarity. Even though his home had been the place of many unpleasant memories, his own bed was the one thing he could find solace in, for there he could fall asleep and pretend the troubles around him didn't exist... at least for a short while.

In the last moments before sleep overtook him, Severus thought about his father. It had been an unexpected conversation, to be sure, but he wasn't sure what to feel about the situation and about the man who had made both his mother's life and his life miserable for years. Should he forgive him? Could he forgive him?

Thoughts of Tobias broke the shortlived happiness Severus had felt lately. He wondered if his father's life was in danger now because of his own outward defiance of Voldemort. Severus knew no one was really as safe as they deluded themselves into believing, but his father was a Muggle. Severus had a wand and knowledge of how Voldemort and the Death Eaters operated, the latter of which gave him an advantage few possessed.

And then there was Lily. He seriously began to worry now that they were no longer at Hogwarts. Dumbledore had afforded them no protection, not that Severus had expected him to, but Severus was now realizing more fully the consequences - or possible consequences - of his actions. Even though Lily was a powerful witch in her own right, her family were Muggles... and even that snooty-nosed Petunia didn't deserve to die at the hands of Death Eaters.

Severus frowned, remembering how Petunia had been the only one to survive before. How cruel life could be. Lily's parents, he recalled, had been targets mere days before her life had been ended. Having not known them as well in his past life, Severus hadn't given it as much thought. Only Lily had mattered to him then, but things had drastically changed now. The very thought of Mr. and Mrs. Evans...

He shook his head. There was little to be had by driving himself mental with worrying. So, Severus reached for a tiny bottle of a sleeping draught on the bedstand and downed it. Otherwise, he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep, and Spinner's End didn't have hoards of hallways for him to restlessly roam like Hogwarts. There would be plenty of time to figure out solutions to his problems in the days to come.

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The following morning, Lily awoke early, hoping to catch Petunia before she had a chance to leave. Lily didn't fool herself into thinking Petunia would hang around any longer than necessary now that she was back for the summer.

Going to the bathroom for her morning ablutions, Lily wasn't surprised to find it was already occupied. The door was locked, and she could hear the sounds of someone getting ready.

"Tuney?" Lily queried, leaning against the door.

"What do *you* want?" Petunia's grouchy voice asked through the door.

"Can we talk?"

"What would I possibly have to say to you, and what do you have to say that I would want to listen to?" Petunia asked nastily.

Sighing, Lily said, "Petunia, open up."

There was a pause, then, "Like hell, Lily. Now, go away."

With a groan of frustration, Lily reached for her wand and aimed it at the lock. A quick *Alohamora* and the door opened.

"What the- ?" Petunia exclaimed, stepping back in shock. Seeing Lily's wand, Petunia shrieked, "What do you think you're doing, you-you freak?! Put that away, or I'll-"

Lily was already returning his wand to her pocket as Petunia ranted. "Calm down," Lily said, annoyed. "I'm not going to do anything to you. Since you wouldn't let me in, and I'm tired of putting up with your insolent attitude, I kindly opened the door for you... saved us both some trouble."

Narrowing her eyes at her sister, Petunia mumbled, "I would have opened it if you'd asked decently."

"Decently?" Lily demanded. "And how did I ask? Undecently, I suppose, because I'm a witch?"

Petunia jumped at the mention of "witch." "Well, that's one thing you understand correctly, then," Petunia muttered, trying to resume the application of her makeup.

With a sigh, Lily stepped into the bathroom. "Look, Petunia," she stated pointedly, "I'm really tired of every attempt at a conversation being nothing but an exchange of insults. We need to work past whatever it is that's come between us."

"I'll tell you what's come between us, Lily," Petunia said rudely. "First it was that Snape boy-"

"His name is Severus," Lily interrupted hotly. "Stop referring to him that way."

"And when will he stop calling me a 'Muggle?'" Petunia inquired, planting her hands on her hips.

"A Muggle is just a person who can't do magic. That's not an insult," Lily argued.

"Well, excuse me if it sounds like one," Petunia snapped. "You know he looks down on me because I'm not like you."

"That's rubbish, and you know it. Maybe Severus was a little nasty toward you when we were kids, but that's because he didn't know any better. The only example of a Muggle he'd had was his abusive father. You see how he is toward Mum and Dad, though. He respects them. They wouldn't treat him like one of their own if they felt ill toward him."

"And that's another thing, Lily," Petunia interrupted. "He's *not* their son! He just suddenly started showing up for holidays and dinners left and right this past year, and oh, look, he's now a part of the family! How delightful!" Petunia shrieked sarcastically.

"You know he has no family of his own to go to," Lily said, trying not to get too worked up. "We're blessed to have the parents we do, but not everyone is so fortunate. I'd think you'd be a little more appreciative."

"Enough!" Petunia exclaimed, throwing a tube of lipstick down in a huff. She balled her fists and made to leave, but Lily was standing in the way.

"Move," Petunia said between her clenched teeth.

"No, I'm not going to move until you've heard what you need to hear," Lily said in a falsely-calm voice. "You've been jealous for years now, and look what it's done to you. Petunia, you are my sister, and nothing is ever going to change that, but the more you choose to go on this way, the more it's going to drive a wedge between us... and I don't want that to happen. I'm sorry you couldn't be a part of the world I've come to know and love, but that's not my fault, and it's not Severus's fault. He just shared it with me and continues to, but that doesn't mean you and I can't be friends."

Petunia wasn't even looking at her sister as she spoke. With her eyebrows arched toward her nose in anger, Petunia hissed, "And what makes you so sure I'm the one who's going to drive a wedge between us? Don't you think maybe you're responsible, too, Lily?"

Petunia shoved her way past Lily, leaving a downtrodden young woman standing alone in the bathroom. Lily's shoulders sank, and she closed the door.

Maybe Petunia was partially right.

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Later that day, Severus and Lily were sitting among a copse of trees near the playground, the spot they had usually occupied as children. The green canopy above was filtering the sunshine through, leaving pockets of brightness on the soft grass. Severus was leaning against a tree, and Lily was lying with her head in his lap, gazing up at him as he spoke.

Playing idly with Lily's long red strands, Severus said, "I saw my father last night. He was rather pleasant for him, and our conversation was meaningful. He... he wants to reconcile, I think."

"And how do you feel about that, Sev?" Lily gently asked, searching his face for his emotions regarding the situation.

"To be honest, I'm not entirely sure. I'm still surprised he has kept to his word, but what's to say he won't go back on it the moment I show him a sliver of forgiveness?" Severus's brow creased, thoughts of greater concern creeping back into his mind.

"It won't be like before," Lily said reassuringly. "He can't hurt your mum anymore... I mean-" Lily stopped, feeling recklessly insensitive for bringing up his mother. "I didn't mean-"

"I know what you meant, Lily," Severus said quietly. "Yes, you're right. I have the advantage of magic that he doesn't, so I guess... I guess it might be worth trying."

Severus was trying to convince himself more than Lily. He could become angry and bitter like he had before, but he knew what that path led to, and he didn't want to become that cruel, jaded man again. Instead, he chose, as difficult as it felt against his worse nature, to take a chance and grant others second chances. If anyone knew about second chances, it was him. If he was being given another chance at life, then the least he could do was bestow the same compassion upon others. What would the purpose be of keeping everything to himself?

Severus's mind gaped at these thoughts. Was his cynical mind truly formulating them? Foreign visitors though they might have been at first, those thoughts were now inhabitants in his mental territory. They had settled and made a home for themselves.

"It's worth it if you feel it is, Sev," Lily replied.

Then, the hopeful look on her face fell, and Severus grew concerned.

"What's wrong?" he questioned.

"Petunia," Lily sighed. "At least you and your father are actually talking some sense to each other. I tried to talk to her this morning, and my attempt just blew up in my face like a bad brew in Potions."

"What happened?"

Shaking her head, Lily said, "I don't know what I can say to convince her that it doesn't have to be this way... this rift between us. Sev, if only she really knew who you are, if only she could see that you're a good person..."

"Is this really all about your friendship with me?" Severus asked. "I think some scars go deeper than that, Lily."

"Maybe," Lily sighed. "She seemed to think it was my fault, too. What have I done? I've been nothing but nice to her!" she defended herself, now sitting up.

"Maybe she doesn't know how to react to kindness?" Severus pointed out, for he knew he was guilty of that. How many times had he lashed out at people who had meant him no ill?

"She's impossible!" Lily insisted.

"She's not impossible, Lily," Severus said exasperatedly. "She's just difficult. Come on, now. Calm down."

Lily looked at him incredulously, then burst out laughing. "Well, this is certainly a change! You're the one advising me to calm down. Am I not usually trying to calm your nerves, Sev?" she teased.

Severus pulled her close, wrapping an arm around her waist, and kissed her. She readily returned the kiss.

"I thought that might shut you up," he said with a smirk. Sobering, he added, "But I know what you mean, Lily. You taught me the value of giving people time and several chances to change. Your sister isn't a lost cause. Maybe my father and she are really the least of our concerns."

Casting him a quizzical look, Lily asked, "What do you mean?"

"There's a war going on, Lily, and while I try not to let it consume my thoughts, it's there nonetheless, slowing eating away."

Chapter Forty-One

For the next couple of weeks, life back at home was uneventful. Severus liked having the house completely to himself, and as much as he missed his mother, he preferred solitude by nature, with the exception of a few people in his life. The television was now gone, as were any other electrical appliances. Having no desire for them, Severus had made Spinner's End truly into his place.

Surprisingly, he hadn't seen any more of his father. Upon his initial encounter with Tobias, Severus had expected the man to be appearing on a regular basis. Having no idea where his father lived nowadays, Severus decided to leave the issue alone. If his father wanted a relationship with his son so badly, he could come by more often. Severus found that he was actually wanting to talk to Tobias again, if only to get some answers to the many questions in his head.

More concerning than his estranged father, however, was thought of the war. Severus would glance out the window every night before going to sleep, finding a peaceful neighborhood just beyond the glass. The summer nights were usually cloudless and calm, adding to the disillusion that all was well. Severus knew better.

A part of him entertained the idea of telling Lily they ought to see less of each other, lest she become a target for Voldemort and his Death Eaters because of association with him. His love for her was mature enough to know when to let her go if need be, but this idea, he knew, was folly. Lily was already a target by default for being Muggleborn, and the fact that she strongly opposed what the Dark Lord stood for also put her at risk. No one was truly safe anymore, and so, Severus quickly pushed that foolish notion away. There was no way he was going to lose Lily this time, whether for noble or not-so-noble reasons. To hold fast to her was like breathing a fresh breath to sustain life. He knew what life was like without her, and he didn't wish to return to that place. If that made him somewhat selfish, then so be it.

Severus kept these thoughts to himself. He could easily imagine Lily's reaction if he said anything about "trying to protect her for her own good." Like most Gryffindors, she was headstrong. What mostly seemed to be occupying Lily's conversations had been complaints

about her older sister. The more Lily told Severus about Petunia, the more he wondered if he should do something to intervene.

"You're really that upset that you keep pursuing your sister?" Severus had asked last time they had spoken about the topic.

"Yes," Lily had said adamantly. "I even tried simply asking her how school was, now that she's at university and all. I've seen her talking in hushed tones on the phone, and I suspect she even has a boyfriend, but I know nothing of his name."

As Severus got ready this morning, he focused on what lay ahead today. Mr. and Mrs. Evans had decided it would be a "lovely idea," as Mrs. Evans had put it, to invite Severus and Petunia's unnamed boyfriend over for dinner. Lily had bemoaned her mother's attempts at pacifying things between her and her sister, saying it was a pointless endeavor, that Petunia would never change.

With low expectations, Severus looked himself over in the mirror one last time before heading out. He knew he would be arriving several hours early, but Lily and he never wasted a moment in seeing each other. He almost always went to her house, or they would meet in the park.

When he reached the Evans' front door, he was just about to ring the bell when the door suddenly flung open. In a flurry of red hair and a lilac blouse, Lily bounded directly into Severus, nearly knocking him over.

"Lily, what the-?" he started to say, but she cut him off.

Grabbing his hand, Lily practically yanked him off the porch and down the steps, across the front yard, and down the sidewalk. Once they were a couple of houses away, Severus forced her to slow down and inquired, "So, are you going to enlighten me as to what that was all about, Lily?"

"Petunia's... boyfriend," Lily huffed.

"He's there now?" Severus asked incredulously.

"Yes," Lily panted, gathering herself. "The sodding arse arrived only a half an hour ago, and he's simply *awful*, Severus. How appropriate for Petunia to have anchored herself with someone like *him*."

Severus thought back to his other life, trying to see if he remembered who Petunia's husband was. Just because she had brought home a boyfriend didn't mean the bloke would be her husband one day. He had never met him before, but he had heard the name mentioned, and then he had a vague recollection of Harry Potter's memories. A large, beefy man with a thoroughly menacing attitude came to mind.

"Dursley," Severus muttered, realizing too late he had spoken the cursed name aloud.

"What did you say?" Lily asked, giving him a strange look.

"Er, nothing," Severus lied. "Just... thinking."

Lily didn't look convinced, but she didn't say otherwise. "Anyway," she stated hotly, "he's severely overweight and has made a right pig of himself already, and dinner isn't scheduled to start for another five hours. He tried to be saccharinely sweet toward Mum and Dad, but he's a complete bootlicker."

Severus felt his insides go numb. He had been right. It had to be Dursley. Hopefully Lily hadn't heard him correctly when he had muttered the lousy man's name.

"Well... you don't have to be back for dinner for quite some time," Severus explained. "Let's just stay away from the house as long as possible and return only when it's ten minutes before dinner."

Lily nodded. "I like your thinking, Sev."

Severus and Lily went to the park, where the old playground was located, the place they had first met. The playground had since fallen into a state of disrepair, and no swings hung where they used to play for hours. Upon reaching the spot where Lily had shown Petunia the wonder of how she could magically open and close a flower in the palm of her hand, she frowned, the memories flooding her mind.

"Petunia and I played here nearly every day in the summer when we were kids," Lily reminisced sadly. Shaking her head, she whispered, "What happened?"

Severus watched her quietly, not sure what to say. He glanced uneasily at the bushes he had hidden behind, an awkward and unkempt little kid who had watched in awe as a lovely and pure flower of a girl played with her less than desirable sister. In comparison to Lily, Petunia had seemed so plain, so ordinary, and to the young Severus, she hadn't been worth his while. Of course, he had mostly longed for someone like him, someone magical who would understand him and would share that with him. He had found her, and she stood beside him now, so alive and vibrant, her hair reflecting the sun's rays and the smell of her sweetness tickling his nose.

Severus's hand brushed against Lily's, and then he clasped her hand with his, squeezing it gently. "She won't stay mad at you forever," he murmured. "How could anyone stay mad at you for long?"

Lily gazed at him and searched him. "You're biased, Severus," she said seriously.

"Perhaps, but regardless of that... if Petunia has any sense, she will come round."

His words surprised him more than they did her. Not so long ago, Severus would have told Lily to stop wasting her time on a person who obviously didn't want to be friends. He would have bitterly remembered how she had stopped being his friend because he had been lousy toward her on more than one occasion, and his self-loathing would have spread to his judgment, whether warranted or not, of others. Ever forced to have seen the worst in himself, so he had seen only the worst in others. Now, however, the long buried compassion his once-broken, stopped-beating heart possessed had surfaced, and he knew a large part of loving another was wishing for their happiness. To see Lily so distraught over the apparent loss of her sister hurt him, too.

"Do you really think so?" Lily asked.

"Yes."

They spent the rest of the afternoon outside, walking through the woods and stopping every so often to rest under a favorite tree. They knew these woods inside and out. Eventually, though, the time came when they had to return to Lily's house, and with heavy footsteps, Lily headed home. Severus hoped the dinner wouldn't be a complete disaster, and he didn't know how he would react if Petunia or her boyfriend were rude to Lily. If they wanted to hate him, that was fine. He didn't care what they thought about him, but he hated to see Lily hurt.

The moment they stepped through the door, Mrs. Evans came bustling toward them, looking flustered.

"There you two are!" she exclaimed, waving her oven-mitted hands in the air. "I was worried you wouldn't be back in time for dinner. You just ran off, Lily, and I had no idea where you had gone off to."

"Sorry, Mum," Lily apologized, blushing. "I just... had to get out of the house."

Mrs. Evans flashed her daughter a half-annoyed look. "Well, go wash up. You may as well, too, Severus. Honestly, where have you two been? Romping around like a couple of kids?"

Lily was about to protest, but Severus grabbed her hand and led her to the first floor bathroom. "It's not worth it," he whispered into her ear.

They washed their hands and tidied up as best as they could and then headed into the dining room, where everyone else was seated. Lily's parents were patiently waiting, but Petunia looked as impatient as can be. She was pointedly looking everywhere but at Lily and Severus. As Severus took his seat, he surveyed the large young man next to Petunia. His hair was brown, and like Lily had said, he was very overweight. He was reminded of Slughorn, as he didn't know anyone else who was so fat.

"Wonderful," Mrs. Evans said, clearly pleased. "Now that everyone is here, we'll say grace and get started."

Mr. Evans said a quick table prayer, and as the meal commenced, Mrs. Evans said, "Severus, this is Petunia's boyfriend, Vernon. Vernon, I'd like you to meet Severus, Lily's best friend since they were just kids and her boyfriend now as well, I'm happy to say."

Severus felt his cheeks go hot at her appraisal. He wasn't used to being called someone's "boyfriend." It sounded so juvenile, but then again, he looked seventeen to the rest of the world.

"A pleasure, I'm sure," Vernon said with his mouth full of food.

Petunia scoffed and stated, "Did you know, Vernon, that Severus attends that school for freaks just like my sister?"

Vernon's eyebrows went up to his hairline, and he coughed, nearly choking on his food. Severus wished he would have.

"You mean the one for criminally-behaved children?" Vernon asked, chuckling rudely.

"Petunia, really," Mrs. Evans admonished.

"That's not the truth," Mr. Evans said. "We didn't raise you to be a liar, darling. If Vernon is to one day be a part of this family, the least you could do is be honest about your sister."

"Part of the family?" Lily asked. "What?"

Petunia smirked and held out her hand for everyone to see. An engagement ring adorned her left ring finger.

"If you had been here earlier, Lily," Mrs. Evans said, "you would have been here for the announcement. Anyway, I think it's wonderful."

Lily gaped. She wanted to ask if this was all an enormous joke. Petunia was only nineteen, and Lily couldn't imagine herself engaged in only two more years.

"Uh... congratulations," Lily said softly.

Severus watched as Lily's face fell. He wished he could have been alone with her, as being at the table seemed inappropriate. Not wishing to be swayed from Vernon's earlier comment about their schooling, however, Severus took the discussion back to that point.

"To answer your question truthfully, Vernon," Severus said firmly, "Lily and I attend a school called Hogwarts. She's a witch, and I'm a wizard, and since you're going to be a part of the family, you ought to know. Lily is just as normal as any one of you, I assure you."

He glared at Vernon, daring the idiot to protest, but Vernon simply had a look of shock and outrage on his purple face. "You're lying, surely," the large man gaped.

"No, I *assure* you, I am not," Severus stated. He cast a glance at Lily, who was gazing back at him with something between awe and wariness.

"What Severus says is true," Mr. Evans interjected. "We're quite proud of our younger daughter. I'll admit, when we first found out, it was quite the surprise, but what a pleasant one."

"Lily was always an imaginative child," Mrs. Evans beamed, "so when we found out she was a witch, many things suddenly made a lot more sense."

"Oh, how delightful!" Petunia shrieked, standing up and tossing her fork and knife to the ground in the process. "'Look, we have a witch in the family! Isn't it wonderful?' Well, I don't think it's wonderful! No one ever asked me what I thought, though, did they? Everyone was simply too happy for pretty, little Lily to give a damn about me!"

Petunia left the table, tears streaming down her cheeks. Vernon was sitting there, a stupid expression on his face. Lily's parents were beyond shocked, and Lily felt mortified. Unable to help the tears that rebelliously poured from her eyes, she stood.

"Lily," Severus said desperately, "what-?"

"Not now, Severus," Lily said in a choked voice, and she ran off, up the stairs.

Severus stood, wondering if he ought to go after her. "I'll be right back," he said in way of apology to Lily's parents, but not caring if his departure was rude to Vernon.

Severus walked toward the stairs, intent on going up to see Lily, but as he passed a window, he saw Petunia's back to him. She was outside, and her face was buried in her hands. He paused, watching her for a moment.

Not knowing why he was doing it, Severus went outside and found Lily's older sister. He stopped a short distance from her. Hearing someone approaching, Petunia lifted her face from her hands, thinking it to be Vernon.

"You!" she said hatefully, glaring daggers at Severus. "Get out of here! Can't you just leave me alone?!"

"Petunia," Severus said levelly, "get a hold of yourself."

Wiping pathetically at her puffy eyes, Petunia sniffed. "Oh, that's rich coming from you. Have you come here to gloat, to tell me how unreasonable I'm being toward my perfect sister?"

"I-" Severus faltered. What could he say? "I know how rejection feels," he said softly.

"If this is some kind of trick-"

Holding a hand up to silence her, Severus continued, "Listen to me. I know you and I don't like each other a whole lot, but I do love Lily, and I hate to see her so upset. She's been telling me for days now how hurt she is that you won't talk to her. Frankly, I don't know what she sees in you, but you *are* her sister."

"I don't see what she sees in you," Petunia sneered.

"Lily always sees the best in people," Severus said quietly, looking at the ground, an odd feeling of shame washing over him. He chanced a glance at Petunia. "Look, I know you don't like me. I don't care what you think of me, but think of Lily. Give her a chance."

"She never gave me a chance," Petunia said coldly. "I was just ordinary, plain-looking Petunia. She was always the one who got all the credit, all the attention, even before she found out what she was."

Unsure if what Petunia was saying was actually true, Severus chose not to argue the point. "Even if that's so, she wants to have a chance with you now. Doesn't that count for something?"

"I just wanted to be included, to be recognized," Petunia nearly whispered. She wasn't really talking to Severus anymore. Then, she looked him straight in the face and said, "You didn't want me to be a part of your games. You were cruel to me."

You weren't exactly kind toward me, either, Severus thought spitefully, but instead he said, "We should have... included you. We were kids, Petunia. Kids are unnecessarily cruel."

"I find adults aren't much better," Petunia muttered sourly.

Severus conceded that much was true. How many times had he been unnecessarily cruel toward those who had done nothing to deserve it? That was a sobering thought. He wasn't here to bare his soul to Petunia, though.

"Next time she wants to talk to you, let her. Or better yet, you find her and talk to her. Life is too short to be wasted being angry and bitter. What would you do if you lost her, I mean really lost her, forever?"

With those words, Severus walked away, leaving Petunia to her thoughts. He had never known what had gone through Petunia's mind after Lily had died before. If Petunia's treatment of Harry was anything to go by, she had resented the boy as much as he had.

Severus went back inside, thinking of how he had chosen to live his miserable life before. How many years had been thrown away being the monster he didn't want to become? He took the steps to the second floor and went down the hallway. He found Lily's door and didn't bother to knock. He entered and before Lily could say a word, he wrapped his arms around her, holding her, the most precious treasure in the world.

Chapter Forty-Two

Lily's tears stopped as Severus held her, and she said into his shirt, "You didn't have to come up here."

"Nonsense," he murmured, giving her no room to argue. Smoothing down her slightly ruffled hair, he continued, "Before I came to you, though, I had a talk with Petunia."

Lily pulled away in shock and asked, "What?"

"I hadn't intended to," Severus said a little defensively. "It's just... Lily, I hate to see you practically in tears over this whole ordeal with your sister."

Lily nodded, understanding dawning. "Well, what did you say? Oh, Sev, I hope you didn't yell at her. Knowing Petunia, she'd only become more difficult to deal with."

"No, Lily, I did no such thing." He wondered if his temper had been so out of check in the past that she had jumped to that conclusion. "The conversation went remarkably well. I really think you two should talk, and I told her as much. She seemed to think she could never compare to you."

"Why didn't she just tell me that, then?" Lily questioned, both annoyed and saddened.

Severus was silent for a couple of minutes. There were many things about himself he didn't openly share with others, including Lily until recently. "People aren't always like you, Lily," he said gently. "You see the best in people. Petunia and I... we're not so optimistic. Bitter people, Lily, don't see the world like you do."

"I don't always see the world through rose-colored glasses, if that's what you're getting at, Sev," Lily countered.

"I didn't mean it as an insult," Severus replied, hoping she would calm down. He was trying especially hard not to let his hackles raise.

"I'm sorry," Lily sighed. "It's just been a long, emotionally-draining day."

Severus embraced her once again and kissed the top of her hand. "I know," he whispered, "but it will be over soon. We ought to head back downstairs before your parents wonder what happened to us, though."

Lily nodded, wiping any remaining traces of tears away. When they arrived downstairs, no one was at the dinner table. Hearing soft voices coming from the sitting room, Severus and Lily followed them. They found a weepy Petunia sitting on the couch, her parents on either side of her, comforting her.

"What happened?" Lily asked.

Mrs. Evans shook her head, returning her attention to Petunia.

Mr. Evans said brusquely, "That Vernon fellow decided to high tail it."

"He *what*?" Lily questioned incredulously. She immediately entered the room and kneeled in front of her sister, taking her hand. "Oh, Petunia, I'm so sorry."

Petunia, who was sobbing, didn't reply, but neither did she pull her hand away. Severus felt awkward left standing there alone, and watching the intimate family scene in front of him felt inappropriate.

"Thank you for dinner," he said. "I'll see myself out."

Lily's parents gave him half-hearted, appreciative smiles, and Lily turned her now watery gaze to him and gave him a nod, mouthing the words, "Thank you."

Not expecting Lily to leave her sister, Severus made his way down the hall and stepped outside. In the darkness, he headed toward home, every so often glancing back at Lily's house, hopeful there was healing taking place within those walls.

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Some time later, long after Petunia's tears had dried up, she was sitting with Lily in her bedroom.

"If he left you at the first sign of what he saw as a problem," Lily was saying, "then he's not worth it."

Petunia shook her head. "Vernon seemed like a decent enough man, and I wasn't exactly being asked out by loads of blokes. He seemed as good as any, and I just latched onto him. When he asked me to marry him, I thought I'd finally gotten lucky."

"Finally?" Lily queried, her brow creased in perplexion.

"Yes, finally," Petunia nearly spat, then calmed some. "I'm not exactly like you in the looks department, Lily. I'm just lucky to get a guy, and now he's gone, all because, all because..."

"Because of me," Lily finished with a sigh. "And Severus, I suppose. Petunia, you know we can't help being magical any more than you can help not being so."

"Yes, I know that," Petunia said shortly, crossing her arms over her chest, "but that doesn't make any of this any easier."

"This', as you call it, doesn't have to be so difficult, Petunia," Lily stated. "When we were kids, it caused us to go our separate ways, but that was years ago. In another year, I'll be out of school and entering the adult world, just like you have. Don't you think we ought to try to at least be civil toward each other?"

"I don't see how that will happen," Petunia argued. "You'll marry that Snape- er, Severus, and you two will disappear into that forbidden world of yours. I'll be left to take care of Mum and Dad as they get older, and I'll grow into an old maid myself. What a life to look forward to," she finished sardonically.

"Tuney," Lily resorted back to her sister's old nickname, unable to hold back the compassion, "you know that's not true. Just because that worthless Vernon up and left doesn't mean you'll be alone for the rest of your life. There are loads of single men out there."

Petunia only huffed, not convinced. Her shoulders drooped in defeat as she released a weary sigh. "It's late, Lily," was all she said.

Figuring there was no point in trying to convince Petunia right now that her life would go on, Lily stood and clapped Petunia briefly on the shoulder and offered her a weak smile.

"You'll believe me one day," she said. "I hope you'll let me still be in your life to tell you when to kick the guy to the curb or when he's worth keeping."

"You'll always be my sister, Lily," Petunia whispered when Lily was at the door.

Lily turned around, and Petunia returned Lily's earlier smile. It was feeble and perhaps a bit forced, but it was hopeful as well.

"Good night, Petunia," Lily said, closing the door.

She went down the hall to her room and headed for the bed, tired herself. A warm feeling suffused her insides as she drifted asleep that night. Perhaps all was not lost.

x x x x x

In the following days, Severus was pleased to hear daily reports from Lily about her improved relationship with her sister. It seemed that reconciliation was not so out of reach between someone as estranged as Petunia and Lily, which gave him hope that maybe one day he might have a restored relationship with his father, although there was a lot more baggage where Tobias Snape was concerned.

Severus hadn't seen his father in weeks now, which was beginning to grow concerning. At first, he had shrugged it off, believing that his father had simply spoken empty words like usual that night Severus had returned home, despite his desperation to seek his son's forgiveness. Now, however, Severus wondered if something had happened to the man.

One day at Lily's house, Severus decided to look through the Muggle telephone directory and find his father's new address. He found a

Snape, Tobias listed at 319-G Becking Way, which was on the other side of town. Since he no longer had a telephone, he asked Lily if he might use hers to call the number listed next to the address.

"Of course," Lily easily agreed.

"Thanks," Severus murmured. He sought the phone and nervously dialed the number. After three rings, the operator's voice came over the phone, telling him the number was no longer in service.

Hanging up the phone, Severus felt a knot growing in the pit of his stomach. Something was wrong.

"Any luck?" Lily asked when he was back in the room with her.

Shaking his head, Severus replied, "No. The number has been disconnected."

"Maybe he's moved?" Lily posed. "Or he didn't pay his bill?"

"I need to find out," Severus stated. "I'm sorry, Lily... I've been thinking about him a lot lately, how odd that it is I haven't heard a word from him... I need to go to his place and see if he's still there."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Lily offered, following him to the door.

Severus stopped and turned to face her. He looked directly into her eyes, knowing she meant well, but said, "I'm sorry, Lily, but this is something I need to do on my own. I'll see you later tonight?"

She nodded, and he brushed a quick kiss on her lips before stepping outside. Severus wasted no time in seeking out the bus stop Lily and he had taken the previous summer when he had visited his mother. Within ten minutes, the bus came, and Severus got on, taking a seat at the back. The entire ride took upwards of a half an hour, what with all the stops between Severus's neighborhood and his destination. When he finally arrived at his stop, he quickly exited the bus and began his trek down the road, making a couple of turns until he came to a dumpy apartment building.

Glancing at the piece of paper with the address on it and back at the building, Severus confirmed he was at the right place and readied himself. He approached the rundown, old heap of bricks and glass and rang the buzzer to the correct number.

Chapter Forty-Three

After ringing the buzzer three times and waiting a combined total of ten minutes, Severus decided no one was going to return his request to enter the building. He held his wand tightly in a deathlike grip, wondering why he hadn't thought to just Apparate here in the first place, but then again, he wasn't familiar with the area where his father was supposedly living, and he didn't want to risk exposing himself in a Muggle neighborhood.

He surreptitiously flicked his wand at the door and muttered, "*Alohomora*."

Grateful for being a wizard, Severus stepped inside and pulled the door closed behind him. Years of spying had taught him when to put up his guard and how to act as if he had eyes in the back of his head. He carefully treaded down the darkened hallway, lit meagerly by a few dim, flickering lamps along the cracked walls decorated with peeling midnight blue paint. Severus could smell the mustiness of the dank place and quickly decided it failed to meet several building codes. Was this all his father could afford?

Checking the numbers on the doors to the individual flats, Severus nearly hexed an elderly woman who opened her door.

For the old lady's part, the poor dear nearly fell over with a heart attack upon seeing the young man with a strange stick out in his hand.

"My word, Mr. Snape," she breathed, "do watch where you're a-going with that thing... er, whatever it is."

Severus stopped. "Ex- excuse me?" he stuttered, surprised she had addressed him so.

The woman examined him more closely and realized her blunder. "Oh, my mistake, young man. It's just that you look extraordinarily like a man who lives on second floor yonder," she said, indicating the stairs behind them.

Severus nodded. "Fancy that," he muttered, then excused himself.

As he made to push his way as politely as possible past the old woman, she gently grabbed his arm, remarking, "You must be his son, then. I've heard mention of a son, 'though never saw him."

Severus nodded again. "Thank you, ma'am," he said, trying not to sound too curt with her.

He approached the stairs and edged up them. At least he had indeed come to the correct place. When he found the door with the right number, Severus didn't bother to knock. Instead, he tried the knob, and the door slowly opened with a long creak. In front of him was a simple room with spartan furnishings. There was no sign that anyone had used the sitting room for quite a while.

As Severus took his first tentative step into the room, his mind went to the worst scenario. What if Voldemort had found out who his father was and abducted him, tortured him, killed him, because of Severus's blatant refusal to join the Death Eaters? Shaking his head, Severus looked for evidence of the use of magic, but found nothing amiss. He didn't dare go for the light switch, but instead whispered, "*Homenum revelio*."

His spell detected the presence of one nonmagical person in the vicinity. Heaving a sigh of relief, Severus passed through the sitting room and found the door to the bedroom. It was open slightly, so he simply gave it a nudge and looked inside. Sprawled on the bed was the form of a man. He was surrounded by several empty bottles. Shaking his head disgustedly, Severus did turn the light on this time.

"Father," he stated in an authoritative voice that would have booked no argument had he been a professor again.

When Tobias didn't reply, Severus approached the man, prodding his foot with his own. Tobias groaned, then whimpered pathetically, recoiling from Severus. Suddenly, his eyes opened, and like a wild man, he sat up in bed, his bloodshot eyes darting around frantically.

"Who's there?" he slurred. "Leave me 'lone!"

"Your son," Severus hissed, "and until you explain to me what you think you're doing, I'm not going anywhere. What are you doing to yourself, Father? I thought you had cleaned up."

"Severus?" Tobias asked, his eyes now focusing, albeit it blurrily, on his son.

Severus flourished his wand at many of the bottles, sending them flying across the room and shattering against the wall. The crashing noise seemed to have shaken some sense into Tobias, for he shakily stood and was pointing his finger accusingly at Severus.

"You kicked me out!" he bellowed. "It's your fault! Do you know what it's like to have to see her face scornin' me every time I go to bed at night?"

Severus quickly cast *Muffliato* and savagely approached his father, roughly grabbing him by the collar and pinning him against the wall. Severus could hear the angry voices of neighbors demanding what was going on, but he ignored them, his eyes boring into his father's.

"You disappoint me, Father," Severus said in a deadly soft voice. "I had thought you would have learned by now how to take responsibility for your actions, for your choices. If anyone killed her, it's *you*. You drove her to madness, and now you can't live with yourself because of it. Are you so eager to join Mother in death? I can tell you what living a life of misery is like, and I can give you a pretty damn good idea of what death feels like: staggering for your last attempt at a wispy breath as your life bleeds out of you, all your regrets bound in the green eyes staring back at you, not sure if you even know the difference between love and hatred."

As he spoke, Severus's grip on his father slackened, and he released him. Severus choked back a dry sob and sank onto the floor, leaving a speechless Tobias gazing down at him.

"Severus, what-?" Tobias questioned, truly confused. "Have you been drinking, too?" he asked stupidly.

The ridiculous question caused Severus to throw his head back and laugh in bitter irony. "Oh, no, Father, that would be far too simple a

solution. You have, as always, taken the easy road." Realizing he was giving away too much information, Severus forced himself to calm down and regained control of his senses. If he had any idea he would have overreacted in such a way upon seeing his father, reminded too closely of his own shortcomings, Severus would have turned a blind eye and not come... or would he?

"You are truly an idiot," Severus said coldly, standing once again. "If you knew of the enemies I've made in my world, you would do well to make amends with me, and I would have tried to protect you. As it is..." he hesitated, then continued, "perhaps the distance between us is for the best. You are no more a father to me than the drunken bastard who beat Mum all those years, than the pathetic man who I took pity upon last Christmas while seeing him shiver on a park bench. If they don't kill you first, you'll die as a result of your alcoholism."

Severus stated a fact in his last sentence. He knew he was being cruel, but kindness didn't seem to work effectively on everyone. Any newfound empathy Severus had developed in this life had been shattered by the realization that some people would never change, no matter how much you wanted them to. To be cruel was to be kind sometimes, and a part of him still hoped Tobias would see the light, as it were, and not die as he drunkenly jumped into the middle of High Street in about two weeks and was hit by a car he should have seen coming. That was one funeral Severus hadn't graced with his presence, and he felt he wouldn't again if it came to that.

"No," Tobias said softly.

Severus merely looked at the other man, mustering an indifferent expression. He couldn't afford to get emotionally involved. He just couldn't.

"No," Tobias repeated more forcefully. "I- I won't die. Don't you think I haven't tried? Severus, didn't I do what you asked all those months ago, and for what? It didn't matter. When I saw you last, it was a last attempt to try and convince myself that maybe we," he gestured forlornly between them, "weren't over."

"And you turned once again to the coward's way out?" Severus asked furiously. "Why, Father? What reason did I give you that made up your mind?"

"You were too kind, too accepting, too willing to allow me into your life again," Tobias stated, staring at the ground ashamedly. In the last few minutes, the effects of the alcohol were wearing off, and Tobias's speech was clearer, although the stale smell of alcohol permeated Severus's nose.

Severus took a step back and sighed. Too kind? Too accepting? Too willing? Him? Those were not the words he was accustomed to hearing being used to describe him.

"What would you rather I do?" Severus asked hopelessly. "Be just as cold and awful as you taught me all the times you exhibited your temper? I can be that way quite easily, let me assure you, but for once..."

I had been deluded into grasping onto hope in giving people second chances as I had been given.

"For once, what?" Tobias queried, unable to help himself.

"Nothing," Severus muttered, pulling a small vial out of his pocket. "Drink this."

"Are you poisoning me?" Tobias asked, his voice too hopeful.

Disturbed, Severus roughly said, "No, it's to help get you sober again, and if you have any sense left in that thick head of yours, you're coming with me."

Incredulous, Tobias gaped at him. "Haven't you been listening to a word I've said?"

"Haven't you listened to a word I've said?" Severus challenged. Whether blessed or condemned for being the better man, Severus yanked the vial from Tobias's fumbling hands and forced the liquid down his throat. "You'll feel slightly dizzy for a couple of minutes, but it will subside. Now, since I'm forced to believe by my own *good*

intentions," he sneered, "that you're worth something more than you've given me reason to think, you will do exactly what I say... for your own good."

Severus grabbed Tobias's arm and Disapparated with him.

Chapter Forty-Four

With a resounding pop, two men suddenly appeared in the abandoned master bedroom in a small house on Spinner's End. The older one looked shaken and immediately thrust himself away from the younger one.

"What the- what are you doing?" Tobias demanded, gazing upon his son with great apprehension. "What the bloody hell was *that*?"

"*That*," Severus stated harshly, "is none of your concern, Father. It was simply the fastest means of getting us here."

"You couldn't have warned me, perhaps? That's the problem with people like you... always doing these magical things unexpectedly and scaring the shit out of regular people like me."

"Shut up," Severus said firmly, no room for argument in his voice. "If you have such a problem with magic, Father, then why did you marry Mum in the first place?"

"I- I didn't know she was a witch," Tobias protested.

"I have a hard time believing Mum wouldn't have been honest with you pretty early on," Severus stated.

"Believe what you want, but that's neither here nor there now," Tobias spat bitterly. He gazed around the familiar room and scowled. "Why have you brought me here?"

Severus ignored his father's question and instead asked, "Are you still working?"

"What?" Tobias questioned, not expecting this. "What does- ?"

"Just answer the question, Father," Severus said witheringly.

Shaking his head, Tobias replied, "Haven't worked in a couple of weeks now."

"Wonderful," Severus muttered sarcastically. "Of course, I'm not surprised," he said more loudly. "You can't very well afford your flat if you have no job, and I daresay your bad habit would have drained whatever small amount you had saved, if you even had sense to save."

"If you're simply going to insult me, Severus, you'd just as soon stop wasting your time. You think I haven't thought these things already?"

Severus wasn't convinced. "Well, but your actions, I would say you haven't. Now, you are going to take this," he said, pulling another vial out of his pocket. "It will knock you out for several hours, and judging by the looks of you, the first thing you need is decent sleep, without being under the effects of alcohol. You will not leave this room until tomorrow morning."

Tobias glared skeptically at his son. "And what's to stop me from leaving? Are you telling me you're keeping me prisoner in my own home?"

"This is no longer your home, seeing as you gave up the responsibility to care for it and its inhabitants a year ago," Severus said coldly. "And if you want to believe you're my prisoner, then so be it. I have been accused of much worse. Now, take this."

Tobias eyed the potion warily. "No," he said, stepping back. "You can't make me."

Stepping closer, Severus whispered dangerously, "Oh, believe me, Father. I can... and I shall."

With a flick of his wand, Severus magically bound his father and then forced the liquid down his throat. Tobias tried to fight, but the struggle was meagre and pointless. Within seconds, Tobias's body went slack as the effects of the sleeping potion took over. Severus levitated his father's body to the bed and dropped him onto the mattress, perhaps not as gently as he could have. Satisfied the older man wouldn't be waking up for several hours, Severus left the room and locked the door. He warded the room to let him know if Tobias tried to escape, whether through the window or by prying the door open.

Severus went to his bedroom, which was nextdoor, and closed himself in. He slumped onto the bed and sighed, wondering what he had gotten himself into. Was it foolish to bring his father back to his home? Things would be different now, though. Severus was of age, and mentally, he was much older than seventeen. As a grown man, Severus had the confidence to deal with his father, who really was only a few years older than him. Looking back, he knew he had been too young before to handle the problems of both of his parents, and so, that had been further cause for him to seek the companionship of his Death Eater friends in those days. With no real family and with the eventual loss of Lily's friendship, he had slipped into the abyss of darkness, but somehow, he had found his way back to the light... and he had a feeling it was still a long journey ahead.

Severus knew he was doing the right thing by helping his father, and he prayed he would have the patience to deal with the stubborn man. With his mother, things had been different. While she had been dependent on him, she had been the victim, not the abuser. Severus knew what it was to be on both sides, and the abuser had almost always been a victim at one point in his or her life. He was determined to break the damaged man out of his father.

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The following morning, Severus was rudely awakened by banging coming from the room nextdoor. With a groan and tiredly rubbing the fogginess from his eyes, Severus left his bed and made his way to the door. He could hear his father's vehement protestations as he made his way down the hall.

"What d'you think you're doing?" Tobias demanded, pounding on the door. "Severus, you can't keep me in here like this!"

"I have no intention of doing so," Severus said smoothly, which must have caught Tobias off-guard, for only silence came. "Stand back from the door, Father," Severus instructed.

"What- what are you gonna do?" Tobias asked warily.

Sighing, Severus said, "Just do as I say."

Severus unlocked and unwarded the door, finding Tobias looking like a caged animal. Wasting no time, Tobias tried to push his way past Severus, but Severus used his magical advantage, and Tobias came in contact with an invisible barrier. Falling to the floor, Tobias immediately stood and crossed his arms.

"You could let me use the damn loo," he muttered sulkily.

"How was I supposed to know what you would try?" Severus posed. "Fine, go to the bathroom, and I strongly suggest you take a shower afterward." He crinkled his nose at the stale odor of day old alcohol emanating off his father.

Tobias had the audacity to look affronted, but he didn't say anything. Severus released the spell keeping Tobias from leaving and watched as the other man left the room. He groaned to himself, wondering what he had gotten himself into. Tobias was worse than a little kid, and Severus was quickly beginning to wonder if he had the patience to deal with him.

While his father showered, Severus went back to his room and quickly changed clothes. He hadn't bothered with changing after the tiring end of yesterday, so with fresh clothes on his back, he went downstairs to the kitchen and put a pot of coffee on. He wasn't about to over-indulge Tobias with anything fancy, so Severus decided his usual dry toast would be good enough for his father if it was good enough for him.

A few minutes later, Tobias came down the stairs, remarking that he thought he had smelled coffee and breakfast cooking. Severus greeted him with a noncommittal grunt and motioned for him to take a seat. Once the toast and coffee were served, Severus dropped into the chair across from his father and stared into his coffee cup.

"Severus," Tobias said evenly.

"What?" Severus asked, still refusing to meet his eye.

"I suppose... I ought to thank you, despite the fact you took me against my will."

Severus was about to protest, but as he gazed up at his father, Tobias held a hand to silence him for a moment. "Wait," Tobias said, "I don't mean to sound accusatory. What I mean to say is... if you hadn't done, I probably wouldn't have come, so you did the right thing."

Severus shook his head and lifted the cup to his thin lips, taking a slow sip. The coffee was old and slightly burnt, leaving a sour aftertaste.

"I'm not so sure I did the right thing," Severus mumbled.

He pointedly looked away from Tobias, focusing his dark eyes anywhere but at the man he called Father.

"I can go," Tobias said simply. "As I told you before, your kindness was too much for me. I would understand if you changed your mind." As Tobias spoke, his deep voice cracked, and Severus felt a small sting in the heart.

Damn it, why?! Why does he have to say it that way? How can I possibly throw him out on the street now that I've already more than gotten my feet wet with this whole messy situation?

Severus took a few minutes to berate himself, but being a better man than Tobias, Severus finally willed himself to keep his gaze on his father, and he stated firmly, "No, Father. You will stay."

And I will be the better man. I won't be like you, Father. I won't treat you as you've treated me. I won't be... the man I used to be.

Incredulous, Tobias croaked, "And what will you have me do?"

"I don't trust your judgment. You will go to rehab and clean up for good, and you will stay there until you're truly sober. I have school starting in another month, so I trust you to be self-sufficient again by that time, but this house will not be yours. You will return to your flat, which I will find a way to keep for you in the meantime, and you will get another job. When I'm at school, we won't have any contact. It's safest that way. You're a Muggle... nonmagical folk... and there are wizards out there, Father, who if they knew you were related to me,

could possibly do you real harm. If you live in the flat, I will do what I can to protect the place. If you lose it because of your failing, then you risk exposing yourself to those who will kill you... if you don't find a way to kill yourself first, and believe me, by the way you're going, you're going to end up dead if you don't change soon.

"If, by Christmas, when I return, you are still sober, I will consider... letting you return to Spinner's End. I will trust your judgment enough to believe you when you say you want a relationship with me, and for your sake, I hope you never go back to your old ways. If you do, Father, you and I will never speak again. Is that plainly clear?"

Tobias's grey eyes were large with shock at the words Severus had uttered. He nodded mutely, then asked, his voice unusually meek, "There are... evil wizards who mean me harm?"

"Yes," Severus said, sighing. "Contrary to what you might think about magical people, Father, they aren't all out to do you ill, but just like 'regular people,' as you call them, magical folk come in two varieties: good and evil. There is a magical war on the horizon, and it's going to be a rough next few years."

"How do you know?"

"It is enough that I know," Severus said repressively, the weight of his foreknowledge pulling him down as he gave thought to the events he knew might come to pass.

"All right, then," Tobias sighed. "Let's... go to this rehab facility. I hope you know what you're doing, because I sure don't."

"I hope so, too," Severus said grimly.

Chapter Forty-Five

Once Tobias was safely at a rehabilitation facility, Severus felt a relief wash over him. Knowing that his father was finally getting the help he needed was reassuring. Maybe his father really could change for the better, but only time would tell.

Severus was once again with Lily, and they were enjoying the summer as it winded down. Lily was happy to know that Severus's father was in a secure place, but thoughts of Voldemort coming after Tobias or Lily's family were disconcerting for both of them.

"Do you really think my family could be in danger, too?" Lily asked.

"No one is safe, Lily," Severus said quietly, looking at the ground as they walked through the woods.

The path was well-worn, and the recent lack of rain made it dry. He kicked his shoes through the dirt, sending a cloud of dust flying.

"I figured as much," Lily conceded, then added, "What can we do?"

"There isn't much we can do, and the Ministry is behind in offering any kind of protection. We can be alert and try to pay attention to what's going on, and we have the advantage of knowing magic. That will help."

Plus I have the knowledge of what happened before. There's no guarantee things will play out the same, however, thought Severus.

He suddenly remembered their Defense teacher from the previous year and shook his head. A pang of guilt spread through Severus as he realized he had known the poor man would be a target for the Death Eaters and would wind up dead, but that had been over a week ago when he had made his end. He could have done something... or at least tried to do something, but he had been caught up in his own problems, mostly dealing with his father. As he released a small groan, Lily gave him a concerned look.

"Sev?" she asked.

"It's nothing," he sighed. "Well, that's not true. I've just come to the frustrating realization that we cannot hide from this war forever."

"Didn't you just get done saying that no one was safe?" Lily questioned. "Why are you so surprised?"

Knowing he sounded ridiculous with that measly excuse, Severus rephrased what he was trying to convey. "I know that's the case, Lily; it's just that I wish we could simply live our lives, you know?"

Just you and me, he thought selfishly.

"That's not possible," Lily said with a frown. "Sev, this doesn't sound like you."

"You mean to say I sound like a coward?" Severus asked defensively. He knew she was right, though. He couldn't very well explain his real thoughts.

"I never said that," Lily replied gently. "Come on, Sev; don't drive yourself mental worrying about what can't be helped."

"Very well," he said, not convinced.

As they attempted to enjoy the rest of the lovely day, Severus outwardly smiled and laughed along with Lily. Inside, however, he was screaming, demanding to be freed from this madness. He wondered how much longer he would live in this bubble before it popped.

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Severus whiled away much time at Spinner's End. Sometimes Lily was with him, and sometimes he was alone. He watched the daily news in both the Muggle paper and in the *Daily Prophet* for signs of Voldemort and his followers on the move, but things were strangely and unsettlingly quiet. Severus didn't remember the Dark Lord being as inactive last time, but he knew it was the summer after his seventh year when the attacks had increased in intensity and frequency, for that was when he had joined the Death Eaters: right in the middle of the growing storm.

One rainy afternoon, when Severus knew Lily was with Petunia, for the two of them had been getting along better and Lily had told him yesterday that she was going to "bond" with her sister, he found himself especially bored. He perused the bookshelves in the sitting room for something to read, but he had scanned these old, dusty shelves a hundred times over. Needing something to get his mind off the near-constant worrying over the war, Severus desired a good book to lose himself in for the remainder of the day.

Not finding anything he hadn't read before, he came across the shelf which contained the photo albums. He had little inclination to look at pictures of himself from his younger days, but he noticed an album that looked older than the rest. He knew it had his parents' wedding pictures in it, but he hadn't looked at it in ages. Thinking of his father's brash comments about his marriage to Eileen, Severus's curiosity was piqued. Wondering if he would find his parents smiling, he removed the old leather-bound album from the shelf and took it with him to the couch, where he sat down and opened the book.

He had forgotten that the first few pages were actually filled with pictures from before his parents' wedding. Taken in the late 1950s, the pictures were black and white and were Muggle photographs. Eileen and Tobias were only in their twenties, and Severus noticed how much they had aged since. He recalled being shocked how young he had looked the first time he had gazed upon his reflection in the mirror upon being reborn, as it were.

Eileen had never been a pretty woman, but Severus had never considered her ugly, either. When she smiled, she had a pleasant enough face, and her hair was a lovely shade of silky black, falling several inches past her shoulders. In the pictures, Eileen and Tobias seemed like any normal couple. Tobias lacked the stubble he usually had nowadays, and his dark brown hair was shorter than currently and was combed neatly, and he was dressed decently.

Of course they look normal, Severus thought bitterly. That was before Father knew Mum was a witch.

He eventually came to the wedding pictures, which only occupied a couple of pages. The wedding ceremony had been small and had

taken place in a church down the road from where Severus still lived. His grandparents were all deceased now, but his father's parents were in one of the wedding pictures. He knew his mother's parents wouldn't have wanted anything to do with her, now that their only daughter had had the audacity to marry a Muggle. A small wedding announcement from the newspaper marked the date as March 20, 1959.

Tobias had been right, then. Slightly more than nine months later, Severus had been born. These pictures told very little about what must have really happened back then, though.

Severus turned a few pages, where his mother became increasingly obviously pregnant. His father had an excited expression on his visage in most of the pictures, no doubt looking forward to being a new father just as much as any young, newly married man. When he flipped the next page, he saw his mother holding him, and his father was gazing over Eileen's shoulder, smiling proudly down at his son. Severus shook his head. If Tobias had married a Muggle and had a Muggle son, he probably wouldn't have become the man he was today. Severus frowned at the baby pictures of himself and was just about to close the album when a knock issued forth from the door.

He placed the album, still open, down on the coffee table and went to the front door, wondering who it could be. He opened the door a fraction, holding his wand just in case. Since Muggles were deterred from his house, he knew it had to be someone magical. When he saw Lily standing there, he instantly relaxed and opened the door wider.

"Lily," he said, surprised, "what are you doing here?"

"Oh, hello to you, too, Severus," Lily grumbled. "May I come in?" She stepped toward him.

"Of- of course," he stammered, wondering what was wrong.

After Lily entered, Severus closed the door and asked, "I trust things didn't go so well with your sister?"

Lily's arms were crossed over her chest as she huffed. Sighing, she dropped them to her sides and breathed, "Yes... well, it started out

fine, but we were doing a bit of shopping, and we ran into that dumpy Vernon fellow, of all people."

Severus made a small noise of dislike. "Bad luck, then," he remarked. "Did he say something?"

"No, Petunia went all loopy, though, and she panicked and demanded we leave at once. It pretty much ruined the rest of the afternoon, and now she's in her room sulking about the whole incident and won't talk to anyone."

Noticing she was wet from the rain, Severus said, "Why don't you come in and have a cup of tea? I can start a fire. I know it's still quite warm, but you look a little chilly."

Smiling faintly, Lily said, "That would be nice. Thanks, Sev."

Waving her off, he told her to wait in the sitting room while he went into the kitchen to get the tea things. After retrieving what he needed, Severus returned to the sitting room, finding Lily seated on the couch with, to his horror, the photo album on her lap. She was in the middle of flipping through it and was toward the end.

"What are you doing?" Severus demanded before he could stop himself. Setting the tea tray down, he hastily strode across the room and yanked the album out of Lily's hands.

"Severus!" Lily exclaimed, angry and hurt.

"That's private," Severus stated, holding the album close to his chest like a shield.

"It was left open on the table," Lily explained heatedly. "You can't just leave something there like that and expect me not to look at it!"

Severus returned the album to its place on the shelf and went back to the tea tray, bringing it farther into the room and setting it on the coffee table where the photo album had been moments before. He proceeded to pour them each a cup of tea and wordlessly offered one to Lily. Sitting down across the table from Lily, Severus stared down into the contents of his cup.

Five minutes passed in silence, and Severus wondered why Lily didn't say anything.

"Are you going to drink your tea before it gets cold?" he finally questioned.

Lily slammed the cup down, startling Severus. He was surprised it didn't break.

"Severus, why are you being so short with me?" Lily shot at him. "I came here because I was upset about my day, hoping you might cheer me up, and all I've been greeted with was coldness."

"I'm sorry," Severus mumbled. "I didn't- I didn't mean to. I just have a lot on my mind." He wanted to retort that he didn't think he had been completely insensitive, but upsetting Lily further was not a good idea.

"Is that why you had the photo album out?"

"Partly, yes," he sighed. "I wanted to see if... my parents were happy at one time."

"And do you think they were?"

"You saw the pictures. What do you think?"

"I didn't mean to pry," Lily said a bit guardedly.

"Don't worry about it. I figured since you'd seen the pictures, you would know; that's all."

"They looked happy," Lily said carefully, "especially when you were born. You were a cute baby," she added, blushing.

Severus snorted. "I never expected to hear that word used to describe me."

"But you were," Lily argued gently, coming over and sitting on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. Resting her forehead on his, Lily continued, "And I still think you're attractive."

"Now you're just mocking me," Severus grumbled, albeit half-heartedly. With her sitting on him like this and nestled so close, Severus was having a hard time concentrating.

Damn hormones, he complained mentally.

"No, Sev, I'm not," Lily said, planting a kiss on his nose and then on the lips. "Are you feeling any better?"

His lips quirked, and Severus murmured, "I thought I was supposed to make you feel better?" Then he returned the kiss, only with more fervor.

Lily giggled after the kiss ended and snuggled closer to him. Severus ensconced her with his arms.

"Having you here is a far better way to spend a rainy afternoon than looking through an old photo album," he whispered.

"Being with you is much nicer than going shopping with Petunia," Lily agreed.

Even though they didn't discuss their problems further that day, they had each other, and simply being together spoke volumes more than words ever could.

Author's Note: This was a hard chapter to write for some reason. I think I am suffering from a small amount of writer's block, but don't worry! I intend to have at least one new chapter for you between now and Christmas! And thank you to all who reviewed and who wished me well. I'm all back to normal health now!

Chapter Forty-Six

The following day when Severus went downstairs for breakfast, he noticed an owl at the window, and he instantly went to the window and opened it up. The bird dropped the rolled parchment onto the table and flew off without so much as a hoot. Severus picked up the scroll and unraveled it, finding his usual list of Hogwarts supplies and books. A second piece of parchment fell out onto the countertop, and curious, Severus picked it up.

He read the letter and reread it to be sure of what he was seeing. His eyes bulged in shock, and he placed the letter down in disbelief.

He had been assigned as Head Boy for his seventh year.

Me? Head Boy? That's preposterous. Potter was made Head Boy last time.

For all the world, Severus couldn't grasp why he had been made Head Boy. Was this another ploy of Dumbledore's to get Severus in the position he wanted? If he was Head Boy, he was sure Lily would be made Head Girl again. He could see no reason why she wouldn't be, as she was more mature than most girls her age, and she had always been a good student.

Since it was still early, Severus abstained from going to Lily's house for another couple of hours. However, once he felt the time was appropriate, he made his way over to her house and rang the doorbell. Hearing the rush of excited footsteps on the other side of the door, Severus was sure it was Lily who would be answering. Within seconds, he was confirmed correct.

"Hi, Sev!" Lily greeted him with a wide grin on her face.

By just the exhilaration on her pretty face, Severus knew she had good news to share.

"Hi, Lily," Severus returned, although not with the same level of enthusiasm.

"I got my Hogwarts letter," she said with preamble. "I also had another letter. Sev, I've been made Head Girl!"

Severus's face broke into a smile, and he hugged her. "That's great, Lily; really, it is."

After breaking free of the embrace, Severus sobered and frowned slightly.

"Sev, what's wrong?"

Severus gazed at her concerned face and forced a small smile, shrugging. "I suppose I ought to be happy, too, because, well... I was made Head Boy," he finished in a small voice.

"Oh, Sev, that's wonderful!" Lily shrieked, throwing herself at him and crushing him in a fierce hug.

Filled with warmth at her genuine happiness for him, Severus blushed slightly and murmured, "Thanks. It's just... surprising, is all."

Lily released him and scowled. "I don't think it's so surprising. You forget last year... you escaped the Death Eaters and refused to join You-Know-Who. You'll be admired, Sev. You were so brave, and I'm sure Dumbledore finally sees how much you've been underappreciated all these years."

Severus was quite uncomfortable at the prospect of this recognition, even though he deeply craved it. He didn't want it to be known by everyone.

"Maybe," Severus muttered, still not convinced.

"Hey, cheer up," Lily said, offering him another smile and a sincere squeeze of the hand. "It's only one year, and then we'll be done forever. Were you planning on going to Diagon Alley to get supplies this year?" she asked, changing the subject in hopes that it might lighten Severus's spirits.

"I don't really need anything, as I already use my mum's old books, but I can go with you if you like," Severus gave in.

The idea of going to Diagon Alley didn't sound half-bad to Severus. It would give him a chance to get out of the house and away from his neighborhood, as he had spent nearly the entire summer at Lily's house, the park, or at home.

"I might need some new robes," Lily commented. "My old ones are getting worn out. What about you? Haven't you grown a couple of inches since you last got them?"

"I have, but... I don't really have the money, Lily."

"Oh, that's right," Lily murmured, feeling ashamed for bringing up the topic of Severus being poor.

A moment of awkward silence passed, and while they were standing on the front porch, the door suddenly opened, and Petunia stepped out. When she saw Severus, she muttered, "Never mind, I'll come back another time."

"No, what is it, Petunia?" Lily asked kindly.

Petunia avoided meeting Severus's eyes, which was off-putting, but he supposed he didn't expect any different from her. Just because Petunia was getting on better with Lily didn't mean she would warm up to him. He chose to stare indifferently at the flower beds lining either side of the stairs leading down to the front walk.

"I was going to go to the corner store to pick up some things for dinner and wondered if you wanted to come along," Petunia said sourly, "but seeing as you're already occupied..."

Lily looked from Petunia to Severus, feeling the tension in the air. "Severus, would you like to go with us? Petunia, is that all right if Severus comes with?"

Both Severus and Petunia gawked at Lily as if she was crazy. Gaping, Petunia stuttered, "Er, n-no... I suppose that's fine," although she sounded anything but fine with the idea.

Severus scowled deeply, wishing Lily wouldn't try to be the peacemaker. "Don't worry about it. You go with your sister, Lily. I'll see you later."

With Petunia standing there, Severus felt dolorous displaying any sort of open affection toward Lily, but he leaned in and kissed her quickly on the cheek and retreated just as Lily started to protest.

"Sev, no, don't go!" she called despondently after him.

Severus tried to wave her off nonchalantly. "It's not a big deal; really, Lily!" he called back. "Go, have a good time with Petunia."

Severus kept walking away at a fast pace, and once he was a couple of houses away, he turned the corner and disappeared from view.

Lily watched him the whole time, feeling dejected for trying to include both Petunia and him. She gazed at her sister, and Petunia seemed smug.

"Did you really expect him to come along?" Petunia inquired, a little nastily.

Lily's shoulders dropped, but then she crossed her arms defensively. "Was it too much to believe you two might actually be seen in public together?" she questioned.

"Why are you yelling at me?" Petunia demanded. "I didn't do anything!"

"No, I suppose not," Lily sighed. "He can be so difficult sometimes..."

Petunia chose to ignore Lily's comment, as she didn't want to dwell on the subject of Severus. Instead, she posed, "So, are you coming or not?"

"Yes, Petunia, I'm coming," Lily relented.

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As soon as Severus was on Spinner's End, he slowed down. He was far enough away from Petunia now, and feeling like a damned coward, he kicked moodily at the dirt along the side of the street. The smell of the filthy stream permeated his nose in the sultry summer air, and he felt the weather was beating down on him, making his disposition worse. Once he reached his house, he went upstairs and stripped off his clothes, feeling dingy and disgusting.

After he showered, Severus put on fresh clothes, but avoided looking at his reflection. The very idea of being made Head Boy made his skin crawl. He knew he *should* be pleased, but Severus Snape was not a man who allowed himself to accept happiness easily. Petunia was a reminder of what he would be met with when he returned to Hogwarts. So many others saw him with eyes marked for disdain, or at least that was what he convinced himself of as the truth.

With time running out, Severus decided to push his bitter thoughts of the upcoming school year to the back of his mind and focus on something else. He hadn't yet been to visit his father at the rehabilitation facility, so he left the house, taking a picture from the old album, and took the bus to the place. Apparating was, once again, too risky, as it was broad daylight, and there were too many Muggles on the crowded streets.

As he left the bus stop and walked toward the facility, Severus wondered briefly what Lily and Petunia were doing presently. He wished Lily wouldn't have tried to invite him along, as he could plainly see Petunia would only have scoffed at the idea, and he knew that Lily knew he was uncomfortable with the whole idea.

Let her be with her sister if that's what she needs, he thought, trying to reason with his roiling emotions. *You have your father to deal with, so you can both share your familial issues later.*

When Severus entered the facility, he had to wait for several minutes before Tobias came into the front room where visitors could be received. Severus studied his father as he entered the room, finding he was presentable enough.

"Hello, Severus," Tobias said, glad to see his son.

"Hello, Father," Severus returned, a little stiffly.

Tobias made a gesture like he was going to hug his son, but when Severus took a tentative step back, Tobias momentarily frowned, but then he recovered and held his hand out. Severus shook his hand, hoping Tobias wouldn't try to pull him into an embrace. He wasn't anywhere near ready to show that level of affection toward the man he called Father.

"Thank you for coming by," Tobias said, taking a seat.

Severus sat down as well. "Not a problem," he murmured. "I trust things are going well for you?"

"Yes, I think so, at least," Tobias stated. "It was hard at first, but I think if I continue along this path, I ought to be able to leave by the end of August."

"Good," Severus replied. "It would be helpful if you were out before I return to school."

There was a lull in the conversation, and Severus wondered what he could really discuss with this man. He had grown up with him living in the same house, but he felt he barely knew him. Recalling the picture he had taken from the photo album, Severus withdrew it from his pocket and held it out to his father.

"What's this?" Tobias asked, taking the picture. He stared down at it for a minute, then smiled sadly. "Yes, I remember this. This was before your mother and I were even married. Where did you find this?"

"It's at home in an old album," Severus explained. "Surely you remember?"

"Your mother put all these pictures in that album years after they were taken. For the longest time, they were unorganized and all over the house, until she sat down one day not too long after you were born and spent the entire day organizing them. I remember how fondly she gazed upon each one as she carefully placed them into the album. I think... I think it was very special for her, that."

As Tobias spoke, Severus noticed a far-away look in his eyes. He had never witnessed such an expression on his father's face. Of course, Tobias had never recalled any fond memories like this.

"Father," Severus said carefully, "would you... would you tell me about Mum? What she was like when you first met?" He left so many questions unasked, but he was hoping his father would open up and perhaps explain what went wrong on his own.

Tobias glanced up from the picture, but continued to hold fast to it. "She worked at the bakery I used to stop by every Friday afternoon after work. You know the one... off Hollow Way, just a couple of blocks from home. We would exchange hellos and other such pleasantries. She was always kind toward me. After a few weeks, I finally worked up the courage to ask her out on a date. She seemed quite taken with me, which was strange, since I never felt I was anybody special, but I think the reason she was so interested was because she was intrigued by anything 'Muggle,' as you call it. Of course, I didn't know that until years later, and when I found out what she was... I was angry she had lied to me all those years."

The color in Tobias's face rose, and his grip on the picture tightened. His breathing was heavy for a few seconds, but he calmed and released his vice grip on the picture. Severus noticed creases all over it. He didn't say anything, in hopes his father would continue.

"We were married, as you know, and she became pregnant with you almost immediately. I was thrilled to think I would be a father, and then you were born. Only a few months old and you were already different. You somehow managed to summon every toy in your room into your crib, and while I thought there had to be a rational explanation at first, when I stepped into the room one afternoon when you were supposed to be napping and saw your favorite teddy bear floating across the room and toward you, I lost it. I ran out of the room and found your mother, intent on showing her. She seemed strangely calm when she watched you, and then she proceeded to pick you up and smile, remarking how happy she was to know you were like her. I demanded an explanation, and she started to explain, but I wanted no part of it. From that moment on, Severus, things were never the same between us."

"And that's when you decided to start drinking and hate your wife and son?" Severus asked accusatorily.

Tobias flinched and nodded. "Yes," he croaked. "It's no excuse, and I know that now. It's too late to go back and change all the things I did wrong, but trust me, if I could relive my life, I would have treated you both so differently."

Tobias's confession was haunting. Severus understood far too well what he meant. What was to be gained by regrets, though?

"I... I believe you," Severus stated gingerly. "You've told me enough for now."

"And what comes next?"

"That's your choice, Father. You seem to no longer want to be the man you were. Can you be the man who first loved Mother? Can you be the proud father you wanted to be?"

"I don't know if I'll ever be that man," Tobias admitted mournfully.

"I would say you're already on the right path," Severus said, standing. "I should go."

"Thank you for visiting."

"I'll see you soon, Father."

Severus left, not sure how to process everything he had just heard. Between the looming war, the inevitable return to Hogwarts, Petunia, and his father, his mind was whirling in all directions. If he thought his life had been complicated before, that was nothing in comparison to the life he had chosen for himself now.

One more author's note: The idea of making Severus Head Boy comes from Matt Quinn.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Severus spent more time than he would have liked brooding over the problems in his new life in the following days. He was prone to brood by nature, but he found it to be distracting, especially when he was with Lily. Before, he almost revelled in his dark moods, but he had slowly changed into a man with a lighter heart, not that he had changed entirely.

And so, when the day came for him to accompany Lily to Diagon Alley, a part of him wanted to stay behind. He knew Lily would be heartbroken if he rejected her invitation, though, and he had already told her he would come. Severus forced himself to shower and dress nicely that day, hoping he would be glad later that he had gone on the shopping trip.

A couple of hours later found the couple in the middle of the crowded main street in Diagon Alley. With less than a week before school resumed, parents were shuffling through the street, jostling and bumping into each other, trying to keep up with their excited children, who always seemed to be several paces in front of their tired parents. Severus hated crowds, so he kept a tight grip on Lily's hand, not wanting to be separated from her. Whenever someone got too close or even had the audacity to bump into him, Severus would glare down his long nose at the exuberant child. Sometimes the child would actually mutter a hasty apology, but more often than not, they would scamper away, scared of Severus's intense gaze.

"There's Madam Malkin's," Lily was saying, and Severus glanced in the direction she was pointing.

"Do you want to go there first?" posed Severus.

Lily gave him a quick nod. "Yes, I'd rather being stuck carrying around my robes than my books. Much lighter, you know."

Severus conceded that was a good point, so they made their way through the insane rush of people and somehow managed to step into the robe shop without running, literally, into anyone. Severus stood by the door, figuring he would wait for Lily there.

"Aren't you going to come in a little farther?" asked Lily.

He shrugged. "You know I'm not getting anything. It won't take that long for you to be measured and get what you need, will it?"

"No, I suppose not," Lily replied, frowning. She glanced briefly at a pile of standard school robes on the table nearby and then back at Severus. "So, you'll just wait by the door, then?"

Severus knew the apothecary wasn't far away, and he knew they would need to make a stop there before the day was through. "How about this?" he suggested. "I'll go to the apothecary, and you can just meet me there."

There was an odd gleam in Lily's eyes when she agreed far too easily, and suspicious, Severus stepped out of Madam Malkin's and went down the street a couple of shops. As he entered the apothecary, he wondered if Lily had something up her sleeve. Why that strange look otherwise? Deciding to push the thought from his mind, Severus focused on the welcome, familiar smells and sights of the apothecary. Being a Potions master, he had frequented apothecaries a lot, especially the one in Hogsmeade.

There were some things he would need for seventh year Potions, but Severus liked simply walking through the smallish shop, seeing what was new or rare and buying ingredients he might later use. He realized he had spent much less time brewing than he had in his previous life. Without Lily, he had needed something to occupy his time, but his time was filled with not only Lily, but with visits to his father and, more daunting, thoughts about how the war would develop this time around.

Thankfully, the apothecary was nearly empty. Students would come in and purchase what they needed as quickly as possible, eager to exit and proceed to some place more exciting. Severus paid them no heed, however, and went about collecting what he wanted. He was in the middle of purchasing them when Lily stepped into the shop, a bag over her shoulder.

"Did you get your robes, then?" Severus asked.

"Yes," Lily said, smiling deviously.

His brow creased in perplexion, but Severus didn't remark further. Lily bought the herbs she needed in the apothecary, and together, they headed for Flourish and Blotts. The book shop was probably the most crowded store along the strip. Lily and Severus had to push their way through several kids who couldn't have been older than second years to make their way to the back of the shop, where the books for year seven were located.

"Do you want to go to Fortescue's after we're done here?" Lily asked.

Severus didn't care much for ice cream, but since they were here, and he knew Lily liked it, he agreed. He helped Lily find the books she needed and carried the majority of them to the check out for her, and after she paid, they graciously exited the shop and crossed the street to Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor.

Lily got a chocolate cone with three scoops, but Severus settled for a mundane single-scoop of vanilla in a cup. Lily teased him good-naturedly for his choice. They found a table outside and sat down, and within minutes, an unwelcome voice greeted them.

"Oh, hi there, Lily!" came the exuberant voice of James Potter.

Severus momentarily figured Potter hadn't seen him, but then Potter continued, "Oh, you're not alone."

Severus glared at the other boy, not surprised to see Sirius Black sidling up behind him. "Potter," he stated evenly.

"Snape," Potter said, although he didn't seem as rude as usual.

Black was now standing next to Potter, and he glared at Severus. "James, c'mon, mate. You should know when you're not wanted."

Lily was frowning, her attempts earlier in the year at trying to make the boys treat even other civilly feeling like they failed. "See you soon," Lily told them, forcing a smile.

"Right you will," Potter replied, offering Lily a slight smile and then actually politely nodding to Severus.

Severus nodded back, not trusting himself to speak. He knew Potter was only being decent because of Lily, but at least he was trying to be mature, unlike Black, who simply left without saying another word, but feeling it necessary to sneer over his shoulder one time time at Severus before departing.

Once the two boys were out of sight, Severus slumped forward in his seat, placing his elbows on the table and resting his chin in the palm of his hand. He sighed.

"Sev, what's wrong?" Lily asked softly.

"This is what I have to look forward to," he stated bitterly. "It's a joke that Dumbledore made me Head Boy. They aren't going to take me seriously."

"You don't know that," Lily countered. "You'll have the authority to make them listen to you if they act like the toerags they seem to be."

Severus knew what it was to have authority. He had been a professor for sixteen years, after all. While he had taken some enjoyment out of abusing his power to watch others cower under his influence, the deeper part of him knew it brought no lasting satisfaction to wield power of others. Voldemort had instilled fear in many by force and power, and Severus didn't want to embrace the part of him that had at one time liked feeling the same thrill. At the end of the day, at the end of his sad life, he knew it couldn't bring happiness. He felt he knew something of happiness now, and he was having a difficult time reconciling the two parts of him.

"Perhaps," was all he muttered. "We'll see."

Lily, still worried for her friend, didn't push the subject. They finished their ice cream, and having completed their shopping, left Diagon Alley and Apparated home. They had Apparated directly into Severus's house, as to avoid risking exposure in the open.

Lily placed her bags down and withdrew something from one of them. Severus was examining the herbs he had purchased and placing them on the kitchen table when Lily approached him with something behind her back. He gave her a curious look and was about to ask what she was up to, but then she held her gift out to him.

"They're for you," she said, a hopeful smile on her lips.

Severus just stared at the folded black robes in her outstretched hands. "Lily, what- ?"

"Well, don't just stand there gaping at them, silly. Take them."

Severus reached for the robes and held them up. They were the standard school robes, large enough for a seventh year boy. "I can't-" he protested.

Lily silenced him with a finger to his lips, then kissed him. "You're Head Boy, Sev. I thought you would appreciate a new set of robes to look nice for the part, but more than that, I wanted you to have them."

Severus flushed, ashamed. "You know I can't afford... Lily, really, I can't accept this. It's too much."

Lily looked hurt. "Sev, why can't you just accept a simple gift? There are no strings attached."

Severus felt even worse now. He hadn't meant to insult or hurt Lily. "It's just... I'm not used to-" he stammered, overcome by emotion. He stopped trying to argue and sighed. "Thank you."

He dropped his arms, holding the robes in one hand, and encircled Lily in a strong embrace. "I know you meant nothing but well, Lily, and for more than the price of the robes, that is worth a lot more to me."

Chapter Forty-Eight

"You are sure you'll be okay?" Severus asked for the third time.

"Yes, Severus, I promise you," Tobias replied adamantly. "I'll behave this time."

Severus gazed at his father quizzically, only half-convinced, but what good would further arguing do? He had picked Tobias up from the rehabilitation facility only an hour ago, and now they were back at Tobias's old apartment.

An awkward silence fell between them.

"Well, I won't be seeing you until Christmas, then," Severus said, making his way toward the door.

"Severus-"

"Yes?" Severus said, stopping in the doorway.

"I- I can't thank you enough for... for everything," Tobias choked.

Severus tried to keep his face impassive, his demeanor cool and calm, but his chest clenched despite his best efforts. He mentally cursed himself, then forced a smile.

"Yes, well... don't let it be a waste," Severus said gruffly, stepping out into the hallway. He closed the door after him and quickly exited the building. Wanting to return home as quickly as possible, Severus found a deserted alley and Apparated directly into his sitting room.

Heaving a sigh of relief, he collapsed onto the couch and threw his head back, resting it on the cushions. He pinched the bridge of his nose. He couldn't afford to become too emotionally attached to his father; he just couldn't... not after everything that had happened. Grateful to be returning to Hogwarts tomorrow, Severus hoped his father would be safe, as he had personally set some wards around Tobias's flat, but more than that, he hoped Tobias wouldn't resort to drinking again. If he did, he would lose his apartment, his safehaven,

and on the streets, his life would be endangered in more than one way.

You can't claim responsibility for the actions of others, Severus told himself. You can only do the best you can for them and hope they don't mess it up.

This had been a hard lesson for Severus to learn. In this life, he had already tried to save his mother and had blamed himself for months afterward for her death, but seeing the choices his father had made, he knew better than to blame himself for any relapse Tobias might have. Severus wondered how he might use his knowledge from his previous life in regards to others, especially someone like Peter Pettigrew, who had betrayed the Potters and joined the Dark Lord without anyone knowing. As much as Severus hoped to stay uninvolved in this war, he had a sinking feeling that was as impossible as the Chudley Canons winning the World Cup.

Later that day, Lily and he took one last walk through the old park, reminiscing about their younger years. Holding hands, they strolled past the abandoned swings, the overgrown bushes Severus had hidden behind, and into their favorite spot of green among the trees. The brook babbled softly in the background as they found solace under a sturdy maple tree, and Lily leaned against Severus's shoulder. He held her close and felt his eyelids grow heavy. He fell into a light sleep for a few minutes, dreaming about what seventh year would be like. He was awakened out of his reverie by Lily's voice.

"Sev?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you feeling any better about being appointed Head Boy?" she queried.

He shrugged. In the past few days, the idea had somewhat grown on him, and Severus found it was really the least of his concerns. "I suppose," he muttered. "At least we get our own private rooms."

"Yes, that'll be nice," Lily mused.

Her hand roamed slowly to his side and then under his shirt, snaking its way across his stomach and up to his chest. For a moment, Severus tensed, elated by her touch, but unaccustomed to physical touch there. It was ridiculous, he knew, but any time Lily had tried to get more physical with him during the past few months, he had awkwardly stopped it, telling her that kissing, holding hands, and feeling over clothes was as far as he would go. The nearly forty-year-old man inside him still felt it somehow wrong to violate a seventeen-year-old girl.

Lily giggled and then tickled him. Severus let out something between a squawk and a huff, embarrassed she had found his most sensitive spot. No one knew that Severus Snape was ticklish, after all.

"Lily, stop that!" he exclaimed indignantly.

"Oh, don't be such a spoil sport, Sev!" Lily retorted. "Have a little fun!"

"What if- what if someone sees us?" he sputtered.

"No one's going to come back here," Lily groused, rolling her eyes. "You really need to lighten up."

Smirking, Severus suddenly grabbed her foot and pulled her sock off. His long, deft fingers slowly moved across the ball of her foot, and then he tickled her with further intensity until Lily was absolutely squirming in his hands.

"Now who's ticklish?" he said silkily.

With a jerk, Lily tugged her foot out of his hands and lept on him like a cat pouncing its prey. Severus hadn't been expecting this, and so, he was pinned to the ground, his arms above his head.

"I'm going to kiss you now," Lily stated matter-of-factly. Leaning in, her mouth grasped his with such ferocity, Severus wasted not a moment returning the favor. His hands were now on her back, massaging just under the shirt where her jeans' waistband was. He could blame it on hormones, but Severus and Lily made out on the green grass, their sacred spot, making a memory neither of them would forget.

The following morning, Severus rode with the Evanses to London to catch the Hogwarts Express. They said their goodbyes on the platform, and Severus and Lily stepped onto the train to head off to Hogwarts one last time.

Severus didn't see the Marauders, and of course he didn't see his old Slytherin friends, as they had all be expelled the previous year. The ride was mostly uneventful and pleasant, and he had the compartment alone with Lily. They did, however, have to join the prefects at one point to go over helping the first years as they exited the train. Only then did Severus see Lupin, who gazed upon him with large eyes, no doubt surprised by Severus's appointment of Head Boy.

Much to Severus's dismay, Lupin approached him and said, "Congratulations, Severus. I see you've made Head Boy."

Severus glared suspiciously at Lupin and frowned. "What's it to you, Lupin?" *And why are you addressing me by my first name? We aren't friends. Then again, you had the audacity to do so when you were a professor at Hogwarts before.*

Lupin now frowned, too. "Can't you take a compliment?"

"I wasn't aware you were complimenting me," Severus replied truthfully. "I thought you were surprised in a negative way."

Severus wanted to kick himself for admitting as much.

"Well, it was a compliment, but take it how you like," Lupin said with a shrug. "As Head Boy, you will have to cooperate with the prefects from all the houses."

"I don't foresee a problem," Severus stated stiffly, stepping away and finding Lily.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

"Lupin trying to dish out compliments," Severus muttered.

"That was kind of him."

Severus crossed his arms and set his mouth in a firm line, refusing to comment further. He was glad to be off the train when they finally arrived at the Hogsmeade station. Following Lily, he stood with the prefects and waited for the first years to congregate in a messy crowd outside the train. They kept them in line until Hagrid took them to the boats, and then they joined the rest of the students on the thestral-drawn carriages to the castle. Severus was oblivious to the stares he was receiving through the whole process, and as he stepped out of a carriage and herded the younger students inside, he finally noticed a group of second or third year Hufflepuffs who kept glancing back at him.

"You're famous, Sev," Lily whispered into his ear, lightly teasing him.

"It's probably more the fact they can't believe I was made Head Boy," Severus mumbled.

When a Hufflepuff boy who was walking not too far out of ear-shot heard him, he exclaimed, "Oh, but it's just that you, er, you... Did you really escape from You-Know-Who's clutches last year?" he asked in awe.

Severus stopped walking, shocked. He forced himself to keep moving a moment later. The boy was giving him a look of admiration he had only ever seen directed at James Potter or Sirius Black. Never at him!

"Yes, that's right," Severus replied repressively. "Now, that's enough."

The boy joined his friends again, and Severus noticed they were whispering among themselves, and some of the girls were giggling and glancing back at him.

"See, Sev, you *are* famous," Lily quipped with a smile, taking hold of his arm as they entered the castle.

Upon his initial step into Hogwarts, Severus felt his seventh year at Hogwarts in this life would be unlike anything he had ever known before.

He was admired. He was famous. He was a leader.

Chapter Forty-Nine

As people filtered into the castle through the main doors, Severus felt like he was on another planet, let alone living another life. He dazedly held Lily's hand, not caring what anyone else thought, and in the sweet oblivion, he didn't notice the scowl the crossed James Potter's face. When everyone was in the Great Hall, Severus forced himself back to reality when Lily spoke.

"I guess we'll need to go to our tables now," she was saying. "The Sorting will begin shortly."

"Wait," Severus whispered, "can I see you later... tonight?"

Lily smiled. "Our usual meeting place, ten o'clock?"

Severus nodded and brushed a kiss on her cheek as they parted. His public display of affection was a newfound ambition. Even at the end of his sixth year, he wouldn't have done something like that. Now, Severus felt bolstered. What did he have to be ashamed of? He knew he had made the right choices this time around, and a pride like he had never felt before filled him. He wondered how long it would last.

Several of the younger Slytherins were gazing at him, although Severus noticed a mixture of emotions displayed on those faces. Like the amiable Hufflepuffs, some had nothing but admiration to show, perhaps because Severus had proven that not all Slytherins would turn rotten and join ranks with Voldemort. Some were fearful, their eyes trepid, and Severus didn't know how they might react to him as the year went on. They were most likely undecided in where their loyalties lay. Some, however, were defiant and even glaring with anger and hatred at Severus, their pure loathing of him and what he stood for obvious. What a disgrace to the proud name of Slytherin to be in love with a Mudblood and go against the Pureblood ideals of Voldemort and Salazar Slytherin himself!

Sobered by the last group, Severus sat down and gazed toward the front of the hall, his eyes fixed on the Sorting Hat. It seemed ages ago when Severus had taken a seat on that stool and been sorted into Slytherin, the house he had desired to join for years before arriving. His mother's tales of Hogwarts, of striving to be someone

great and important made him long to be placed into the house that would help mold his dreams into reality, especially for a little boy who had been told repeatedly he was a nobody.

He allowed himself a momentary sad smile for his mother's memory, realizing Eileen Prince had probably never felt like someone great or important. To him, though, she would always be his mother. She had done the best she could for him, and that, in the end, made her great and important to him.

Sitting right behind the Sorting Hat was Dumbledore, and Severus frowned, recalling Dumbledore's words: "You know, sometimes I think we Sort too soon."

Those words had never settled right with him, even now. He knew he had been brave, but he didn't think he was a Gryffindor by any stretch of the means. Besides, why did a person have to be in the supposedly noble and courageous house to be brave... or in Hufflepuff to be loyal, or in Ravenclaw to be intelligent? Severus was all of these things and more. He realized now how much he hated the Sorting, how dividing people into houses did less for encouraging inter-house cooperation and more for causing large divisions among the students, into their adult lives. He stopped looking at Dumbledore and his Gryffindor ideals and the blasted Sorting Hat and found Lily's eyes, the only truth in the whole place.

Through the whole Sorting, Severus kept his eyes fasted on Lily, and she gazed back at him with just as much assurance, conviction, and strength. Their love had broken down so many barriers and even transcended time and space. This, Severus knew, was a real love. What else could have brought him back to life?

After the Sorting, the usual announcements took place, and from her seat, Lily wasn't listening any more than Severus. When the feast's beginning was given, Lily's concentration on Severus was broken when James Potter broke in, "Hey, Lily, what's wrong with you?"

Lily shook her head and forced a smile. "Nothing, James," she said in a falsely-sweet voice, annoyed at him for interrupting her connection with Severus.

"So, you're Head Girl, huh?" he asked. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," she replied civilly.

"Remus told me Snape was made Head Boy. Is that true?" he questioned.

"Yes," Lily stated defiantly, daring him to protest.

"Hmmm, an interesting choice," James muttered. "Not what I would have expected."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Lily questioned delicately, trying to keep her temper in check. If James dared to insult Severus in front of her, he would be receiving a kick and a hex under the table.

"Well, it *is* surprising, you must admit, Lily," Mary Macdonald suddenly cut in.

Lily had to concede the point true and fair enough. Not so long ago, Severus had been going down a path she was afraid would lead him to joining ranks with the Death Eaters, but his sixth year had proven the complete opposite. She wondered how she could have been so wrong about him during fifth year, when it seemed they had been growing apart. Looking back, it seemed any arguments they had had back then were long buried in the past and had no bearing on the present.

"Well, I'm glad he was made Head Boy," Lily said proudly, beaming in Severus's direction for a moment. "I'd say his house needs a little encouragement, a little uplifting."

"Encouragement to do what?" Sirius Black spat bitterly.

Lily glared at him. "What will it take to convince you that not all Slytherins are bad, Black? That Severus isn't evil?"

"I'll kindly ask you to remember a little incident not so long ago, Evans, when your precious Snivellus cut me open several times and almost let me bleed to death. He almost kills me and he's made Head Boy?" he asked incredulously.

"And I'll ask you to recall that Severus healed you and that it was an accident," Lily hissed at him. "I should've defended Severus more during fifth year when he told me about your supposed little 'prank' that almost resulted in his death."

Several students nearby gasped. It was not common knowledge that Sirius had pranked Severus during fifth year, as it had been at night, and even Lily didn't know all the details.

Sirius opened his mouth like he was going to protest, but closed it again. He muttered something to James and went back to eating. Lupin cast Lily an apologetic look, but she only glared at him as well. He couldn't even say something to shut his friend up?

After dinner, the students left the Great Hall and went to their dormitories. Severus thought it odd he would have his own room again, but first, he would go to the Slytherin common room and help where needed.

A third year, who Severus knew was Mulciber's younger brother, came up to him and hissed, "You got my brother expelled. You think you're really going to win, do you?"

"Mind your own business," Severus said sternly, thinking the youngster nobody threatening. "You're too young to even understand what you're talking about."

"He knows what he's talking about," a normally quiet fourth year girl, whose name was Rose Clearwater, said softly. Her large eyes and wispy tone reminded Severus of Luna Lovegood. She offered Severus a timid smile. "I meant, you know what you're talking about," she stated, indicating Severus.

"Thank you, Miss Clearwater," Severus replied, "but go on to your room now."

The oddity of students speaking directly to him as an authority figure was strangely familiar, and he half-expected them to call him "sir," but he knew he wasn't their professor... nor did he have any desire to be.

Once the students were in their rooms, Severus left the prefects in charge and went to find his room. Contrary to the rumors, the Head Boy and Head Girl did not have rooms anywhere near each other. Also, just as boys weren't allowed to enter girls' dormitories, so it was the same with the Head Girl's room. Severus found his room on the second floor, a considerable distance from the dungeons. His personal belongings were already inside, so all he had to do was unpack and organize his things.

Looking at the time, he realized it was nearing when he needed to meet Lily. By the time Severus got to their broom closet, it would be almost ten, so he left his room and began heading in that direction.

When he entered the closet, he found Lily already inside. She reached for him and pulled him close the instant he stepped inside, nearly knocking him over. A couple of brooms did fall over, however, rattling as they hit the floor. For a few minutes, they held their breath, wondering if the noise had alerted any teachers. When they heard no footsteps, Lily giggled, her hand muffling the laughter as it covered her mouth. Severus grinned, finding it ironic that he was out after curfew, but they were Head Boy and Girl, after all. They couldn't get in trouble, but he supposed if the teachers found them in this closet together, they would be accused of not setting a good example for the rest of the students.

As if anyone would ever know, Severus thought, imagining *he* would have been the likeliest teacher to find the Head Boy and Girl snogging after dark.

"Well, that was a close call," Lily breathed finally.

"I'd say," Severus murmured, roping his arms around her.

"How's it going so far?"

"Fine." He shrugged.

"Fine?"

"Mulciber's younger brother tried to act all defiant in front of the rest of the students, trying to put me in my place, apparently," Severus said, unfazed by the incident.

Lily's brow, however, creased with worry. "Well, he might not be a threat, but, Sev, you need to be careful. I know your old friends are gone, but you're bound to be met with opposition by certain people in your house."

"And what about your house?" he asked. "Surely there's opposition to my appointment, but a different kind."

"Well, yeah," Lily admitted, thinking of Sirius, "but you're above that."

Severus recalled his earlier feeling of invigoration. How had he momentarily fallen into thinking he would be admired? Even though some of the students apparently did admire him now, he wouldn't fool himself into thinking he was popular with everyone. Since when had he cared what others thought of him, though? Entwining Lily's hand with his own, he felt his heart beat with a solid purpose. He had Lily, and really, that was all that mattered.

"That, Lily, is only because of you."

"That's not true, Sev," she said gently, caressing his cheek. "Your choices were always yours to make."

"Were they?" Severus asked in an uncharacteristically small voice. He sounded almost like a child. He thought especially of his other life, of serving Voldemort and then Dumbledore, but always serving Lily out of his love for her. He told himself that she was his reason for going on in his pathetic life, for fighting on the side of Light. Had time changed him?

It was a hard truth for Severus to swallow, but he realized he had given his father another chance now. He had helped his mother. He no longer had any desire to entangle himself with Voldemort's ilk. The evil he had witnessed as a Death Eater now disgusted and disturbed him. Life, he realized, was more valuable than anything, and only love made it worth living.

"I wish... I wish I were dead..."

"And what use would that be to anyone?" said Dumbledore coldly. "If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear."

His way forward was clear.

Dumbledore's words from another lifetime so long ago reached across time and space. He had tried to understand them then. He had done what he could, but only now did Severus fully understand.

His life had been valuable... and not just as a pawn to an evil overlord or a manipulative headmaster. His life had been valuable because he had loved.

His life was valuable because he still loved, only now did *he* feel the value of his life, for that love was returned.

"I love you, Lily, so very much," he whispered shakily into her ear, his hands gently stroking her long hair.

He saw a tear form in her eye and fall, but he kissed it away.

"Don't cry," he said softly. "This is something to celebrate."

And she kissed him.

Chapter Fifty

Despite his newfound feeling of self-worth, Severus still was no optimist by any stretch of the means. His first week back at Hogwarts proved interesting, for lack of a better word. The admiration in the eyes of several younger students was a mixed blessing, but Severus quickly grew tired of the attention and impatient with the looks he received. While many of these students were even in Slytherin, that didn't help matters when it came to those, like Mulciber's younger brother, who opposed him. The Gryffindors continued to either ignore his plight with the Dark Lord last spring or to look upon him with apprehension, still too wary to trust him, simply because he was in Slytherin.

"What good could ever come out of Slytherin?" was the question the other houses asked, especially the valiant and brave of Gryffindor.

Sneering at the very thought of having to share Potions with the Gryffindors, Severus entered the classroom and waited for Lily to arrive, the only Gryffindor he thought he would ever care for. He gazed indifferently at the front of the classroom, his eyes watching anywhere but the area where the Marauders would sit. Somehow, even that idiot, Pettigrew, had managed to scrape by, probably aided heavily by his friends. Black and Potter were usually the ones Severus had to worry about in class, but Lupin and Pettigrew were still just as annoying. He hadn't seen much of the boys yet this year, but based on the frowns Potter cast his way in the hall, Severus could easily imagine Potter had quickly forgotten his truce with Lily a few months earlier.

Unfortunately, the Marauders arrived before Lily, but unlike the beginning of last year, they sat far away from Severus. He couldn't help but notice Black beckoning his friends to a table at the back of the classroom.

Good, thought Severus. I don't care if they hate me... just as long as they leave me alone.

The last thing he needed were more rude comments from Black about having been made Head Boy. He didn't want to look in their direction, but for some reason, he didn't tear his eyes away

immediately. Pettigrew had the nerve to gaze stupidly in Severus's direction just long enough to irk him, and with a heated glare at Pettigrew, Severus turned in his seat as Lily sat next to him. Slughorn entered the room seconds later.

"You were very nearly late," Severus whispered to Lily.

Shrugging, Lily returned, "You know, that time of month." She smiled slightly.

Severus, clearly uncomfortable, blushed. "Er... right." He knew what she meant, but never had Lily or any other girl felt the need to impart such information to him. He would have been perfectly fine without knowing those details.

"Sorry," Lily murmured, noticing his discomfort.

From the front of the classroom, Slughorn's voice boomed, "Well, well, students! Welcome back to Potions during your final and seventh year at Hogwarts!"

Severus sighed, wishing Slughorn would tone his speech down. Severus admired the man's enthusiasm for the subject, as he himself had a passion for Potions, but he always felt his opening speech to be better. Then again, Severus was about as jovial as a crab about to be cooked for dinner.

Slughorn's words were lost to Severus, as he didn't really need to listen to know what to do in the lesson. The subject would be as much of a breeze this year as it had been the previous year. Severus found his eyes drifting over the students, curious if anyone had dropped the class. Sure enough, there were a few less students this year, and when his eyes rested on the Marauders for a second, Severus once again noticed Pettigrew gazing at him.

What the hell? Severus thought, now truly irritated, but also confused.

Pettigrew almost looked... in awe. Severus decided he would keep an eye on Pettigrew, knowing the other boy's history... or future in this case. Was Pettigrew admiring *him* because he had stood up to the Dark Lord?

Slughorn assigned them to do some reading in the first chapter before starting the lesson, so while the others actually read over the material, Severus's mind drifted. He had never known Pettigrew very well before, and he truly had no idea what had motivated the rat of a man to join the Death Eaters in the first place. Unlike being in Slytherin, where the pressure was high to conform to the Pureblood ideology, Pettigrew wouldn't have had that happening to him in Gryffindor. Plus, it wasn't like the simpering wimp didn't have friends who were actually good friends. As much as Severus disliked the Marauders, he supposed they were all best friends, as they were inseparable... weren't they?

Then again, Severus had overheard Potter's demeaning comments toward his little friend. Potter wasn't exactly known for his kindness, though. What Severus felt for Pettigrew wasn't sorrow or compassion, but all the same, knowing what his role could ultimately be regarding the Prophecy, Severus didn't want the rat joining the Death Eaters if he could help it. Now that he was with Lily, he had a direct interest in ensuring her safety, and his own.

The Prophecy, Severus thought, frowning. *How does that factor into all this?*

Severus was well aware that many events had already been altered in this life. His intentions after leaving Hogwarts were to be with Lily, to hopefully marry her, but he wouldn't be foolish enough to have a child within the next few years. What horrible irony it would be for *his* child to be marked as the Chosen One or the Boy-Who-Lived. He shuddered at the very thought.

His thoughts were interrupted by Slughorn saying, "You may now begin brewing."

Lily noticed Severus's troubled expression as she set a flame under their cauldron.

"Sev?" she asked quietly. "Is something wrong? I couldn't help but notice you weren't reading."

"I'm fine," Severus lied, distracted.

Lily sighed and said, "Well, whatever it is, you're not off the hook that easily. We'll talk later. For now, let's just prove that we're the best Potions students again."

"Right," Severus murmured, forcing himself to pay attention to the assignment.

He saw they were brewing Skele-Gro and instantly began cutting the bicorn horn.

"How'd you know- ?" Lily started to ask. "Did you even look at the instructions?"

"I looked at the assignment before class," Severus lied again.

Thankful Lily wasn't a Legilimens, Severus determined to close his mind to those bothersome thoughts from minutes ago. He had plenty of time to speculate over what could happen as the war progressed, but for now, it would do them no good to fail their assignment.

After class was over, Lily walked next to Severus. He was quiet until they came to the point when they would need to go their separate ways to their next classes.

"I'll see you later," Severus said.

Lily nodded, a slightly hurt look on her face. She wanted to drag him aside and demand he tell her what he was keeping from her, but they couldn't be late for class.

"Okay," Lily sighed. "Just promise me you'll be honest?"

Severus smiled, hoping it appeared convincing. "Honest, right."

Still not sure if she was satisfied, Severus went to Charms. How was it that Lily could see right through him when he had been able to fool Voldemort, a highly skilled Legilimens, for years?

The answer to that question would have to wait, for after Charms, when Severus returned to the Slytherin common room, there was a notice on the board that drew his attention. A couple of the prefects

were standing there, seemingly accustomed to reading the patrolling schedule. Severus checked the rest of the week and saw that he was scheduled to patrol the halls from ten until eleven o'clock this evening. That was after curfew for all other students. When he saw who he would be patrolling with, he scowled and walked away.

Of course it wouldn't be Lily or even a Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw. Of all the prefects, Lupin was the last he would have picked to spend an hour of his day with. He thought he heard a snigger coming from behind him, and when Severus turned to see the source, he wasn't surprised to see Roger Mulciber there.

"You ought to be happy to be spending time with a goody-two-shoe Gryffindork, Snape," Mulciber jeered.

"Keep it up and you'll force me to remove house points from Slytherin," Severus replied, trying to keep his resolve.

"Oooo, house points, what a loss there!" Mulciber exclaimed in a mock-concerned voice. A couple of the students near him laughed.

Severus chose to ignore the ingrates, as he wasn't going to be provoked by the likes of third years. He left the common room and went to his private room, where he tried to study, but thoughts about how the war would be changed kept invading his mind. When it came time for dinner, Severus went down to the Great Hall and forced himself to consume some food, even though he didn't feel particularly hungry.

A part of him wanted to avoid Lily for the evening, as he really didn't want to answer her questions about his behavior earlier. What was he supposed to do, admit he was reliving his life, tell the truth? As much as he loved her, he didn't think she would believe a word, even if he did tell her. Anyone would think him crazy, and for good, logical reason. He had his old memories from another lifetime, that was true, but for now, Severus decided to keep them a secret. He would hold on to his secret as long as possible.

The larger part of him longed to sit with Lily outside on one of the last days of summer. He was leaving the Great Hall when she spotted him, and he waited by the door for her to catch up.

"I wondered if we would get to hang out for a little while tonight," Lily said, catching her breath.

"Of course," Severus complied. "Did you want to head outside now? It'll be getting dark in another hour."

"That would be great."

They left the castle and headed toward the lake. Several other students were already outside. Severus sought Lily's hand, and together, they walked in companionable silence around the lake.

"I was worried something was really bothering you in Potions," Lily finally remarked. "Sev, is everything really okay?"

"Things are different, yet the same," Severus replied honestly. "The week isn't even over, and I'm having to deal with what's clearly a divided house."

"Isn't Slughorn doing anything?"

Snorting disdainfully, Severus muttered, "What do you think, Lily? Slughorn only shows an interest in students who he sees reason to take a liking to. It surprises me Dumbledore even made him Head of House and that he's been so for so long." Thinking of his days as Head of Slytherin, Severus added, "If I were Head of Slytherin, things would be quite different."

"Oh, like how?" Lily questioned, truly intrigued.

"Well, for one, I wouldn't have an exclusive club for a select group of students. I wouldn't tolerate anything but the best work from my students, and I would expect the proper respect that's due to a teacher. Then again, I would never teach if I could help it." He smirked slightly, realizing his past predicament, glad he could find some humor in the situation.

"No, I don't suppose you would like teaching," Lily said, chuckling gently.

Severus gave her a tight-lipped smile, his sense of humor waning. Sobered back to the reality of his knowledge of the war and those involved, Severus hoped he had distracted Lily from asking further questions.

He was wrong.

"So, that's all that was bothering you?" she asked.

"Mostly," he admitted. "There's the whole thing with my father, too. Now that I'm not around, I have to trust his judgment, and that's a precarious thing."

Lily nodded with understanding. "I can see how that would be concerning."

Severus knew she wasn't yet convinced, so he finally broke and said, "And there's the usual - this damn war. You know it's always on my mind, Lily."

Only you have no idea to what extent, Severus thought grimly.

Lily squeezed his hand. "I know," was all she said.

Severus expected her to say more, but was glad and relieved she didn't. As the sun set, they watched the sky change color, and once darkness was dominant and the temperature started to cool, they went back inside.

"Do you want to go to the library for a bit?" Lily posed.

"I have to patrol the halls with Lupin in a couple of hours," Severus said sourly, "but I guess so."

For close to the next two hours, they were in the library. Severus did his assignments with his mind only half on the task. When the time came for Lily to return to her room, Severus wished her a good night, and they parted with a kiss.

Severus returned his books to his room and waited in the Entrance Hall for Lupin to show up. He grew impatient, thinking the werewolf

must have been slacking and might not even come. He hoped that was the case.

But Lupin sauntered down the stairs and to Severus's side at ten on the dot.

"Good evening, Severus," Lupin politely greeted him, offering him a smile.

Severus returned the greeting with a sneer. "Since when did you assume it okay to address me by my given name, Lupin?"

Lupin frowned and was about to speak, but Severus cut him off. "Let me make one thing very clear. I don't care if we are forced by our duties to spend time together. I don't care if you think you're being kind toward me because you are enamoured like countless others by my supposedly great courage to stand up to You-Know-Who. We are not friends, Lupin, and we never will be."

Taken aback, Lupin replied, "Let's just get this over with then, shall we?"

Severus detected the rejection in Lupin's voice and couldn't help but wonder why the werewolf was so adamant about being on friendly terms with him. They walked down the corridor in silence for ten minutes, making turns here and there. Nothing was amiss. Finally, Severus's curiosity got the better of him, and he asked, "Why do you persist?"

"Persist?" Lupin echoed.

"Yes, you persist in trying to be something akin to a friend to me when I have given you absolutely no inclination that states your presence is welcome or wanted. You were always insufferably annoying like that, yet if you really cared like you falsely let on, you would have stood up to your *friends*," he sneered, "a long time ago. You never once stopped them."

"And risk losing their friendship?" Lupin asked. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not popular like James and Sirius. Peter and I are lucky just to be included."

"Am I supposed to feel sorry for you, a werewolf?" Severus inquired harshly.

"I don't-" Lupin started to say, but then glared at Severus. "What's your problem, Snape? Yes, I'm aware you know of my condition, but in case you're still festering over that incident that happened in fifth year, you must know that I had no hand in it. Besides, you're not the only one who's had it rough. I just thought... maybe you would understand what it's like to be a bit different from everybody else."

Severus was floored into silence for a minute. "I always thought the four of you were inseparable," he said quietly. "You have real friends, Lupin, contrary to what you might think sometimes. They even tolerate Pettigrew, which is ridiculous because the idiot-"

"Don't talk about Peter like that," Lupin interrupted hotly. "You don't know anything-"

"I know he practically worships the ground Potter walks on. Pettigrew aligns himself with those who he sees as powerful, those who will protect him." As Severus spoke, he realized he might understand Pettigrew's motivation for joining the Dark Lord before.

Lupin shifted uncomfortably. "A good observation. I suppose you noticed the way he was looking at you today?"

Severus nodded curtly.

"It is true that... Peter has been greatly intrigued as to how you managed to escape last year from You-Know-Who. Like the rest of the wizarding world, he fears a war."

"And am I to assume he thinks he can get in my good graces, that I would offer him protection better than that inflated-ego, Potter?"

"You know, you don't need to constantly insult my friends when you speak of them," Lupin retorted, "but yes, I think that is what Peter intends."

Interesting, Severus thought, intrigued by the turn of events. While he didn't care for Pettigrew, he now was definitely going to be keeping a

close watch on the little rat. If he could keep Pettigrew from joining the Death Eaters, that would be one less problem he had to worry about. Just as he had protected Harry for the benefit of Lily, so he would keep Pettigrew from becoming a Death Eater for Lily's benefit.

"Sev- er, Snape?" Lupin asked, wondering why Severus hadn't replied.

Snapping out of his thoughts, Severus said, "Your little friend might actually be wise for once."

"What are you talking about?"

Severus waved him off. "I believe we have corridor to patrol?" he posed sarcastically, cutting off the topic.

Lupin sighed. "Let's get this over with, then."

Chapter Fifty-One

"I still can't believe *he* was made Head Boy," Sirius said for the hundredth time that week.

James sighed. "We know, mate. It doesn't help, you repeating it over and over again."

Three seventh year Gryffindor boys were occupying the area closest to the fireplace in the common room, where a fire crackled merrily, warming their faces and casting a golden glow on Peter Pettigrew's rat-like features as he turned to gaze up at his friends. James and Sirius were lounging on the couch, leaving Peter to sit on the floor while Remus was on hall duty with Severus. They were supposed to be doing Transfigurations homework, but any hope of that actually happening had vanished an hour ago.

"Well, I don't see you smiling over it, Prongs," Sirius muttered sulkily.

"No, you're right," James admitted. "It's more the fact that he's still got Lily in his grasp. I really thought... well, I didn't expect it to last this long."

Sirius snorted. "So much for your mature and noble approach, eh?"

James scowled. "I *tried* to be a gentlemen about it, and you know how hard that was for me."

Sirius released a short, bark-like laugh. "Yeah, doesn't exactly come naturally to you, does it?"

"Maybe Wormtail can get on Snape's good side," James joked, looking down at his smaller friend.

Peter cringed and avoided James's eyes.

"Good one, Prongs," Sirius laughed. "We saw the way you were lookin' at Snivelly during Potions. Moony told me you told him you admired Snape."

"Shut up, Padfoot," Peter said in a pitiful, defensive voice.

"Ah, but you don't deny it!" Sirius egged him on.

"Well, he did... uh, he did escape from You-Know-Who last year," Peter pointed out weakly.

"Yes, that he did," James said, nodding. He and Sirius sobered. "But admiring *Snape*? C'mon, Wormtail!"

Peter didn't say anything further, but to himself, he kept wondering how Severus had managed such a feat. He wasn't as stupid as his friends thought. He knew a war was on the horizon, and in another year, they wouldn't be at Hogwarts. They wouldn't be protected any longer, and the thought of having to fend for himself terrified Peter. Were his friends really going to back him up? He inwardly cowered, partly hating himself for doubting their loyalty to him, but his own lousy loyalty to them didn't even enter his one track mind. He didn't know how to approach Severus and ask him about the Dark Lord, but right now, Severus was already thinking of how he would use Pettigrew to his advantage.

At that same moment, Remus entered the common room and joined his friends, much to his relief. They could tell by the look on his face that his duty of monitoring the halls hadn't gone well.

"Did you have fun walking through dark, empty corridors with Snape, Moony?" Sirius teased.

When Remus had entered, he had overheard Sirius's remark to Peter. "You were talking about Snape?" he ventured.

Nodding, James said, "Yes, and seeing as you just came from being with him, how is the surly bastard?"

Remus didn't laugh at James's attempt at humor. "It was fine," he muttered, not really wanting to talk about it.

"Oh, come on, Moony!" Sirius prodded. "Something must have happened! Did you say anything to piss Snively off?"

"You know my just being with him is reason enough to put him in a bad mood," Remus remarked.

"Moony, you really know how to bring light to a party," James said wryly. "Anyway, we were just talking about how Wormtail here has eyes only for Snivellus. Isn't that sweet?" he mocked.

Peter flushed a horrible shade of red. "Not funny, James," he murmured.

"Lay off Peter," Remus said, more defensively than he intended.

"Hey, what's got your knickers in a twist?" Sirius asked, frowning. "Spending too much time with Snape dampen your mood?"

"You could say that," Remus said sullenly. He looked at Peter and said, "Don't try to admire him, Wormtail. He doesn't care to befriend any of us, anyway."

"Befriend us?" Sirius asked incredulously, and James burst out laughing.

"Since when would you want to be his friend, Moony?" James inquired, thinking Remus to be telling a tall tale.

Remus didn't feel like dignifying his friend's question with a reply. Instead, he told them, "I think I'll head to bed. Good night, guys."

After Remus left, James and Sirius exchanged a glance, then gazed down at Peter on the floor.

"Maybe you'd better heed his advice... or was that a warning?" James said. "Regardless, Wormtail, you don't want to go making friends with him. I still don't trust the git."

In his mind, James still wasn't convinced that Severus wouldn't try to turn rotten. Sirius definitely thought the Slytherin boy to be nothing but bad news, but Peter... that was another matter all together.

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Severus was grateful to be back in his private room that night. Lupin was as annoying as ever, thinking he somehow had the right to impose his unwanted, far too forward attempt at friendship... after all

the times he had failed to show any inclination to stand up to his own friends when they picked on Severus.

The development with Pettigrew was interesting, to say the least. As Severus undressed and got ready for bed, he wondered how he ought to approach the issue. Should he wait for Pettigrew to come to him, or should he take the first step? As Severus crawled into bed and extinguished the candle on the nightstand, he knew he would have to act. Pettigrew was much too cowardly to take the first step.

When he awoke the following morning, Severus was glad it was a Saturday. He took his time getting ready before breakfast, knowing Lily liked to sleep in on the weekend. He hoped to catch her in the Great Hall, thinking they could spend most of the day together. Since it was early September, the weather was mild.

In the Great Hall, Severus didn't yet see Lily, but he wasn't worried. The hall wasn't too full yet. At the Slytherin table, Severus had to intervene amongst his own house three times. It seemed the division was growing by the day, and the faction that was against Severus was led by Roger Mulciber, not surprisingly. Severus mostly ignored the junior version of his older, nasty brother, but he kept a careful eye on him nonetheless.

While Severus ate breakfast, he kept glancing over at the entrance to the Great Hall, wondering when Lily would show up. None of the Marauders were there yet, either. Little did Severus know that while he was drinking his pumpkin juice and nibbling on some toast, James Potter was seeking out Lily...

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Lily had had a good night's sleep and was on her way to the Great Hall when James approached her.

"Good morning, Lily," he said, his voice too pleasant for her liking.

"Hello... James," she replied carefully, eyeing him suspiciously. "What do you want?"

"Oh, Lily, is that any way to greet me? No 'How are you?'"

Lily sighed. "Fine. How are you, *James*?"

"So kind of you to ask," James said sweetly, as Lily rolled her eyes. "I'm well. I'll even be so *kind* as to ask how you are."

"Hungry," Lily replied pointedly. "As a matter of fact, I was on my way to-"

"The Great Hall? Me, too."

Lily was growing more wary by the minute, wondering what James was playing at. He had always been an egotistical prat in the past, and now he was pretending, obviously, to be a gentleman.

"Drop the act, James," Lily said impatiently as they walked. "What do you really want?"

"Well, you haven't spoken more than a quick 'hello' to me since returning," James pointed out truthfully. "I hadn't seen you since last school year. How was your summer?"

"Actually very good," Lily admitted. "You know that Severus lives but a ten minute walk from me. We spent a lot of time together, and I think we've grown even closer." Lily smirked, knowing her words would razz James.

James, for his part, forced himself to stay calm. "That's... great," he said, coughing awkwardly. "But, er... Lily, let me just ask you... What is it about Snape that you like so much?" When Lily glared at him, James added hastily, "No, honestly! I'm just curious."

Lily stopped walking and stepped into a side hallway, leaning against the wall with her arms crossed. "Honestly?" she asked, raising an eyebrow in a very Severus-like manner. James noticed this and scowled.

"You've been spending far too much time around him," James remarked. "You're even picking up his habits."

"So, what of it?" Lily posed.

"That's not the point," James said. "Just answer my question... please."

"Very well," Lily sighed. "As I told you, Severus lives near me, but you've known that. You know we've been friends since we were nine. We have a history, James. We knew each other long before we were forced into separate houses, when all this ludicrous prejudice began. He may not show his true self to the world, but I *know* him better than anyone. I love him, and he loves me. Maybe if you would have stopped making his life hell years ago, you could have reconciled and seen what I saw. Are you ready to remove the blinders?"

"I've left him alone," James pointed out. "I haven't hexed him or picked on him in months."

"But neither have you tried to talk to him."

"What would I have to say to him that he would listen to?" James asked. "It doesn't matter, Lily. He's obviously won you."

"Won me?" Lily asked, aghast.

"You... you know I've fancied you," James said in an uncharacteristically small voice.

"Yes, I know," Lily replied gently. "But it's time you move on. You went about it the wrong way, anyway, you prat." She laughed good naturedly.

James forced a weak smile and shrugged. "All right. Let's go eat breakfast. I'm pretty hungry myself."

Lily smiled genuinely and walked alongside James. She found she could consider him a friend now, and for a fleeting moment, she wondered what would have happened if Severus hadn't made the big turnaround he had over a year ago. What if Severus had kept on being friends with Mulciber and Avery? Would James have finally wooed her? She snorted at the thought.

Me?! With James?!

"Is something funny?" the subject of her thoughts asked, casting her a sidelong, quizzical look.

"Never mind," Lily replied as they entered the Great Hall.

From the Slytherin table, Severus watched as Lily strolled into the Great Hall with Potter at her side. He frowned, suddenly losing his appetite. Why was she with him, and why was she smiling like that? An old jealousy rose inside him, and for a moment, Severus felt his insecurity pushing itself to the surface.

Don't be ridiculous, he chided himself. You ought to know better by now than to think she would leave you for Potter. That was in a different lifetime. You were a different man then.

Feeling better, Severus finished eating breakfast. He still wanted to know what Lily was doing with Potter, though. Without hesitation, he stood and strode over to the Gryffindor table. He stopped directly behind Lily and Potter.

"Hi, Severus," Lily said, turning around.

"Hello, Lily," Severus replied. He nodded at Potter.

Potter just nodded back and returned to eating. "Outside by the lake in ten minutes?" Lily asked.

Severus nodded and left. He found their usual spot and waited. When Lily joined him, he stood and hugged her. They then settled against the tree.

"I saw you were talking to Potter," Severus said.

"Yes, I was," Lily replied. "And before you worry about anything that was said, he simply wanted to know what I saw in you. I told him I love you and that you are wonderful."

Severus felt a warmth on his cheeks and knew he was blushing. The warmth spread to his insides, and he held Lily closer.

"I think your answer is more than sufficient," he whispered with a genuine smile, content in his confidence in their relationship.

Author's Note: I'm sorry for the lack of Severus in this chapter, but the development of other characters was necessary.

Chapter Fifty-Two

It was unusual for Peter Pettigrew to be apart from his friends, but a week after Remus's warnings about not trying to befriend Severus, Peter still had the Slytherin boy in his head. Every Potions class had been marked with intermittent stares in the other boy's direction, and yesterday, Peter even thought he might have mustered up enough courage to approach Severus after class.

That was a joke, and Peter knew it. He didn't like Severus by any means, but that didn't mean he couldn't be intrigued. For all the Gryffindor prejudices against the Slytherins, Peter was truly surprised to see a Slytherin who didn't exhibit the supposed evil the Gryffindors charged them with. While Peter had hardly spoken three words to Lily Evans, he didn't think she was a fool to be friends with Severus. Lily had always been sensible and smart... everything Peter knew he was not.

Perhaps the only person who had ever really found him endearing was his own mother, and it was that reason now why he wasn't with James, Sirius, and Remus. He was on his way to the owlery to deliver his weekly letter to his mum.

Once he reached his destination, he selected a tawny owl and sent the rolled letter off with the bird. Leaning on the frame of the window, he watched as the owl flew off into the distance. Sighing, he closed his eyes, feeling the gentle breeze blow through his hair. Just as he was starting to relax, he heard a mocking, cruel voice.

"What're *you* doing up here, Gryffindork?"

Startled, Peter recoiled from the window and turned around to face his tormentor. A group of Slytherins who couldn't be older than fourth years stood there, blocking the only exit.

"L-leave me alone," Peter stuttered.

The ring leader of the group, a broad-faced, sneering boy whose name escaped Peter took a step forward. He laughed maliciously. "Oh, and what are you gonna do about it? Your friends aren't here to save you this time."

Peter's mind was whirling. The Slytherin boy's name was on his lips... He had been teased by his brother before, and the ridiculous thing was, Peter was several years older than the younger brother!

"Mulciber," Peter finally uttered. He feebly reached for his wand, hoping to use one of the hexes James and Sirius had taught him, but his reflexes had never been very fast.

"Expelliarmus!" Mulciber shouted, and Peter's wand flew out of his hand.

Roger Mulciber, followed by the three other boys, slowly approached Peter, who was now shaking pathetically. He thought for a moment to turn into a rat and scamper off before the others realized what had happened, but he knew his secret needed to remain a secret. Getting in trouble with Dumbledore and, even worse, with the Ministry for breaking the law wasn't a consequence Peter cared to face.

"Gryffindors," Mulciber spat. "The whole lot of you make me sick! You-Know-Who has the right idea, and you, a Pureblood! You ought to be ashamed of yourself for being a traitor!"

"How- how do you k-know that?" Peter asked, trying to sound defiant.

"Word gets around about loyalties, and you, Pettigrew, are about the weakest of your lot. Without your friends to save you, you're nothing. Even though you're a measly Gryffindor, you'd still be smart to join up with the Dark Lord while you still have the chance. My parents told me what You-Know-Who said... that he'll start targeting blood traitors and Mudbloods alike. If you care about your poor mother-"

"How d'you know- ?"

"That you write to your dear, old mum every week?" Mulciber scoffed. "You think we don't overhear your simpering conversations out by the lake or in the Great Hall with your little friends?"

Peter swallowed nervously. He wished the others would just leave already, but wishing them gone wouldn't change his predicament. He had been approached last year by the elder Mulciber. He didn't know

if his weakness was so apparent that the Slytherins could see right through him, but now, it seemed he was at their mercy.

Just then, a biting, authoritative voice came from the door.

"Mulciber!"

Peter flinched at the commanding tone of the voice and gazed at the door. He had to keep his mouth from flying open in shock. Standing there was Severus Snape, who was much taller than the third and fourth years and Peter himself.

Mulciber turned around as well and glared daggers at the Head Boy.

"What the bloody hell are you doing here, Snape?" demanded Mulciber, obviously angry at having been interrupted.

"Put your wand down," Severus said coldly, "and get out before I report you to the headmaster."

Mulciber, no longer interested in Peter, stepped toward Severus. He was nearly a head shorter than Severus, but his demeanor and facial features, so twisted with hatred, reminded Severus far too much of the older Mulciber.

"You just wait," Mulciber hissed. "You'll meet your end soon." Motioning toward the other students with him, they followed him out of the room without another word.

Severus watched them go all the way down the stairs, and when he was confident they were gone, he directed his attention toward Peter. He picked up the other boy's wand and held it out to him.

Peter simply stared in fear at Severus, his watery eyes on the wand.

Sighing in annoyance, Severus said witheringly, "Well, take it."

Reaching out with a trembling hand, Peter took the wand from Severus and quickly shoved it into his pocket. His eyes didn't meet Severus's dark ones. "Th-thank you," he muttered.

Severus nodded and frowned at the deplorable sight in front of him. "What happened, if I may ask?" he inquired.

"I, uh... was just sending a letter to my mum," Peter nearly whimpered. "They just came at me. I- I didn't do anything-"

"I never said you did," Severus said coolly.

"And what were you doing nearby?" Peter asked suspiciously, seeming to regain a bit of integrity.

"You're not the only one who has parents he writes to," Severus said, sickened by how cowardly Peter was acting.

"Oh, r-right," Peter muttered, flushing.

Severus had been trying to keep an eye on Peter for the past several days, wondering when he might have the opportunity to talk one-on-one to him. Now that he was alone with him, he found he was so disgusted by how spineless Pettigrew was, he wanted to leave. Had his idea been a bad one?

Just as Severus was about to go, now growing irritated at Pettigrew's lack of respect to even thank him for saving his miserable hide, Peter suddenly blurted out, "Is it true you escaped from You-Know-Who?"

Severus stopped abruptly in the doorway, his hand resting on the frame. He pivoted quickly and smirked at Peter.

"Ah, so that is why you have taken to staring at me during Potions class, I take it?" he asked smoothly, enjoying Peter's reaction.

Peter flinched and turned a deep shade of red. Severus already knew the truth from Lupin, but he wanted to hear it from Peter's mouth.

"I, uh... just wondered," Peter mumbled. "So, it's true then? How'd you manage it?"

Severus noticed the hungry gleam in Pettigrew's eyes and frowned. The boy was greedy for protection. Severus merely shook his head and snorted.

"You really are pitiful, Wormtail," he remarked.

"Hey!" Peter exclaimed indignantly. "If my friends were here-"

"But they aren't, are they?" Severus questioned harshly, closing in on the smaller boy. Peter was recoiling, afraid Severus was going to attack him.

"I- I knew it," Peter stammered. "You only chased off those others so you could do what you want to me instead. Sirius was right. You are horrible."

Severus laughed bitterly. "You have no idea, Pettigrew, but that is not what I'm interested in discussing. You see, I know exactly what's going through that thick head of yours. Without your *friends* to protect you, you're reduced to a simpering, little nobody. Not so tough without a couple of bullies backing you up, are you? You, Pettigrew, have been part of a group that made my life miserable for years. It's no wonder you're fearful of what I might do to you right now. Be afraid if you must, as that seems to come so easily to you, but listen, and listen carefully. Contrary to whatever Potter and Black might say about me, I have no desire to join You-Know-Who. Trust me when I say that I know what despicable things he and his followers stand for, and serving him is not about glory and power. He would just as soon harm any one of his followers as he would his enemy, and if you think you will be safe by hiding in my shadow, you are wrong. No one is safe, Wormtail."

Peter slunk back against the window, his teeth chattering wildly. He looked like a trapped animal, fretfully glancing around for an escape. His voice was lost.

"Pettigrew!" Severus suddenly yelled.

This seemed to get Peter's attention.

"W-what?" he stammered.

"Have you been listening to a word I've said?"

"Y-yes, but what c-can I do?"

"You can be a man for once and stop hiding behind others," Severus said boldly. "As asinine as your friends are, they are your true friends. They would probably die for you. You ought to do the same for them if they actually mean something to you."

"D-die?!" Pettigrew cried, tears now streaking down his cheeks. "But I don't want to die!"

"And who do you think does?" Severus demanded, now truly angry. "It's a choice we'll all have to make soon. In a few short months, we'll be out of Hogwarts, and your character will be tested. You can only run and hide for so long. Would you rather people remembered you as a loyal and brave friend or as a traitor who cared more about his own life?"

Peter's bitter tears continued to fall, for he knew how he would answer that question. He would be the coward. People would hate him and his memory, but he couldn't voice the truth to Severus.

"But I'm weak," Peter admitted.

As Severus watched the dejected boy in front of him, he thought of what Peter had become in his other life. Shaking his head, Severus felt the smallest amount of pity for him.

"I used to feel the same way," Severus said softly, "until I realized that I had someone like Lily for a friend. As I told you, you have friends. That is more than I could say in my house. I think... I think having friends, people we care about, makes us stronger."

Peter couldn't believe what he was hearing. Severus Snape almost sounded kind.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" Peter asked, unable to stop himself. "I've never given you reason to."

"I am not nice," Severus replied repressively, "but I am decent. Perhaps if you or Lupin had stood up to Potter and Black in the past when they were taking enjoyment out of tormenting me, you might have seen something worthwhile in me. It's a pity you had to wait until

I did something as *heroic*," he sneered, "as escaping from You-Know-Who for you to realize it."

"S-sorry," Peter whispered. "I was afraid they wouldn't be my friends otherwise."

"Potter and Black might be bastards, but I believe you do have real friends in them," Severus stated. "Now that I'm thoroughly done saving your arse and boosting your esteem, I have better things to do. Good afternoon, Wormtail."

Severus left Peter to his thoughts and withdrew to his room. He hadn't failed to send a letter to his father, as he hadn't actually written one. No, that had just been an excuse to explain why he was nearby. The truth was that Severus knew Mulciber and his friends were up to no good, and at the very least, as Head Boy, he had a duty to perform. He hoped he had done more than his duty, however. He prayed what he had told Pettigrew might actually sink in.

Chapter Fifty-Three

A few days after the incident with Pettigrew, Severus's life continued down the same vein it had been. It seemed Roger Mulciber and his cronies wouldn't relent, however, and every time Severus encountered the group of boys, they were up to no good. The removal of house points from Slytherin became a regular occurrence, and with growing irritation, Severus knew he would have to either talk with Slughorn or Dumbledore soon about the junior Death Eaters.

One day after dinner, Severus was surveying the common room for trouble. Mulciber and his friends were no where to be found, so he took a seat on the couch, deciding to relax. His thoughts drifted to his conversation with Pettigrew, and he wondered again if it had made any difference. He supposed only time would tell. Pettigrew didn't stare at him as often during Potions, which was a relief, but Severus was sure the rat of a boy had told his friends about their conversation. Surprisingly, the Marauders hadn't bothered him... yet.

Lost in his thoughts, Severus was startled out of them by a plain, dull voice asking, "Can we talk?"

Severus shook himself out of his mindly wanderings and turned his head toward the speaker. Regulus Black was standing there, no expression in particular on his face. He looked remarkably like his older brother, but his face seldom held any emotion. While Sirius was either grinning or scowling or laughing or ranting, Regulus was listless and almost detached. Thinking of the other boy, Severus realized he had hardly known him in his past life. He hadn't spoken a single word to him in this life, so he was vexed as to why Regulus would want to talk to him now.

"Very well," Severus replied guardly.

Regulus dropped into a chair nearby and posed, "Why did you defy the Dark Lord?"

There was nothing threatening in the way the question was asked, but neither was there any awe. The question might have been asked out of mere curiosity, but even that seemed objectionable, as the tone was flat. It barely passed as a question, even.

"Because I don't believe in what he stands for," Severus stated simply.

"Why?"

"Why are you so interested?" Severus asked, his guard going up more.

Regulus shrugged indifferently, almost appearing bored with the conversation. Severus wouldn't have been surprised if the other boy had yawned.

"My family, you know, is an ancient Pureblood line. My parents support the Dark Lord. I always thought my brother was an idiot for going against them, for being sorted into Gryffindor." As Regulus spoke, his voice took on a bitter quality, and he uttered "Gryffindor" like it needed to be spit out. "He doesn't even live at home anymore. Anyway, that's beside the point. I still think Sirius is an idiot for any number of reasons, but what you did made me think. I followed what I knew because it seemed right at the time, but now I'm not entirely sure."

Severus nodded carefully, not ready to believe the words coming from Regulus's mouth. He may not have known the other boy well before, but he did know Regulus had been killed for trying to leave the Death Eaters. Perhaps Regulus wasn't as cut-throat and evil as so many of the others. Was he similar to Severus? Had someone been threatened who Regulus cared about, and had that made him change his mind?

"Whatever you decide," Severus said, "know this: I do not think the Dark Lord would treat his servants any better than his enemies. He tried to promise me power, glory, anything, you name it, but I know he speaks nothing but lies."

Regulus pondered Severus's words and finally nodded. "Thank you, Snape," he replied, his voice once again dull. He stood and sauntered up to his room.

Severus watched the other boy as he left, feeling both curious and cautious. He wouldn't openly trust Regulus, but if he could sway

Regulus from joining the Death Eaters, like Pettigrew, that would one less person he needed to worry about.

Noting the time, Severus knew he would need to be in the library soon to study with Lily. He regrettably had to patrol the halls again tonight... with Lupin. He had yet to patrol with Lily, and he had a suspicion that Dumbledore had arranged the assignments like that on purpose.

He quickly stopped by his room to collect his books and then proceeded to the library. Lily was already there, but he wasn't late. Taking a seat next to her, he was greeted with a kiss. Seconds later, they heard the indignant squawk of Madam Pince, the librarian.

Lily giggled softly as the librarian walked away, muttering threats under her breath. Severus's mouth twitched on one side, and he half-smiled, mildly amused by the older woman's antics.

"You would think we were cursing her precious books by just kissing," Lily joked.

"Don't let her hear you say that," Severus whispered back. "You're probably right." He smirked.

Lily sobered and gave Severus a searching gaze. "You know, your sense of humor has really improved over the past several months," she said matter-of-factly.

"I suppose I could blame that one on you," Severus replied. "Look at you, Lily: changing people's senses of humor *and* cursing the books in the library by kissing humorless men. What dark powers do you possess?"

Lily stifled a giggle and gave Severus a gentle slap on the upper arm. "You're horrible," she murmured, still smiling.

"I know," Severus said.

The playful banter between them was a pleasant side-effect of being in Lily's company so often. Severus knew he wouldn't have been able to take a joke a few months ago without losing his temper and feeling

he was being ridiculed. He knew better now than to think Lily would ever say anything rude or condescending to him. The earlier mood he had felt of unease around Regulus and followed by the annoyance at having to patrol with Lupin disappeared. He was filled with a blissful warmth that went all the way to his toes.

"Well, I suppose we ought to actually get some studying done while we're here," Lily said, trying to compose herself. "Or else Madam Pince really will throw us out."

"Right," Severus agreed, inwardly a little disappointed they couldn't continue their banter.

Throughout their studying, however, they exchanged knowing looks, stole kisses, and whispered inside jokes. As much as Severus enjoyed learning, studying seventh year subject matter was mostly old hat for him and more often than not caused him boredom.

Eventually, the time came when they had to part ways. Severus was still in a relatively good mood, although more saddened than anything that he had to leave Lily for the time being.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Sev," Lily told him.

"Until then," Severus said softly, and they kissed one last time.

Severus returned his study materials to his room and went to the Entrance Hall, where he awaited Lupin's arrival. Lupin was right on time, and as he approached Severus, he was quiet. Severus raised a curious eyebrow at the other boy.

"Let's do this, shall we?" Severus inquired.

Lupin merely nodded and walked in silence alongside Severus.

Well, this is quite the opposite it was last time, Severus thought.

Perhaps against his better judgment, Severus finally asked, a little sarcastically, "What, no pleasant greeting this time, Lupin?"

Lupin frowned at Severus. "No," was all he uttered.

"You're less talkative than I'm accused of usually being," Severus couldn't help but remark.

"So, now you're willing to talk to me?" Lupin suddenly questioned harshly.

Taken aback, Severus felt his good mood dissipate. "And I thought I was rude," Severus replied, glaring at Lupin.

"What do you want from me, Snape?" Lupin asked, his tone growing more irritated by the second. "I just don't get you. You tell me you have no interest in being friends and are incredibly rude to me one day, and now you're the one initiating conversation with me? And what was that you were trying to do when you protected Peter a few days back?"

"For your information," Severus said stiffly, "I was simply doing my duty as Head Boy when I aided Pettigrew." He avoided responding to Lupin's other accusations, for he wasn't sure what answer to supply.

"From what Peter told me, you more than saved him from those bullies. You were half-decent to him and gave him advice. That's not something I would have expected from you, not after you seemed to make it clear you hated our guts... my friends and me."

Severus wasn't going to tell Lupin the reason he was helping Pettigrew was out of self-interest, or was it? He felt himself closing up, as had been his usual way of dealing with probing questions in the past, but something inside tugged at his heartstrings, and Severus admitted, grudgingly, "You are not like Potter and Black, and Pettigrew isn't like them, either... although he's not like you."

Refusing to elaborate further, Severus stopped speaking.

Lupin's eyes were large with shock, but he didn't say anything, either. Severus hadn't told him he liked him, far from it, but Lupin thought maybe Peter's recounting of Severus's interaction with him to be truthful. Maybe Severus Snape was more decent than he gave him credit for.

Chapter Fifty-Four

September progressed slowly into October, the amount of daylight shortening and a chill entering the air that hadn't been there since early spring. With fewer hours of daylight, students were found outside less and less in the evening, and when the cold that marked the eventual onset of winter broke, the students were confined to the castle, which, much to Severus's dismay, meant more opportunities for trouble to arise in Slytherin.

The students grew restless, awaiting their first Hogsmeade outing, which was scheduled for the last weekend of October, just before Halloween. By the time mid-October rolled around, Severus had lost track of how many times he had to intervene in the Slytherin common room, or worse, between houses. Being Head Boy was not the honor everyone thought it was. Like anything, the higher the position, the more responsibility that came with it.

In the weeks since the beginning of seventh year, Severus had learned to endure almost weekly patrols at night with Lupin. He was sure Dumbledore had arranged it thus, as he never got to patrol with Lily. The werewolf's company grew more tolerable, and the rest of the Marauders were scarce, with the exception of in Potions, when Peter Pettigrew would still cast a curious look in his direction from time to time.

While Severus couldn't have been happier that his relationship with Lily had developed and matured into its present state, the niggling feeling of the impending war never left him. He recalled his conversation with Regulus Black, wondering if any good had come from it, but Black had withdrawn into the shadows again, and while he didn't partake in tormenting other students like Roger Mulciber and his cronies did, neither did he stand up to such bullies and defend what was right.

Every time Severus would see Dumbledore in the Great Hall during meals or happen to catch a glimpse of him in passing in the halls, he would ponder what the headmaster knew about Voldemort. There had been so many secrets, so many lies, so many things covered up before, and Severus still hadn't forgiven the old man for keeping him

in the dark. While he would never prostrate himself as Dumbledore's little spy again, he grew ever-more concerned about the future and this bloody war.

Severus groaned to himself for the tenth time that hour, as he was alone in his room, and no one would have to overhear his private grumbling. Was he doing everything he could to aid the cause for good in the upcoming events? He couldn't very well except things to play out as they had before, however, as the circumstances had vastly changed in this life. His mind went back to Pettigrew, to seeing something to pity in the weaker boy all those weeks ago. Dare he help him, but how?

The only time he would be able to find Pettigrew alone would be when he sent his mother a letter by owl, so Severus decided to confront him then. He knew what day of the week Pettigrew went up to the owlery and what time of day. It was truly clockwork.

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A couple of days later, Severus kept an eye on Pettigrew from a distance, watching as the shorter boy walked down the hall after class. The halls were quickly emptying of students, all intent on returning to their common rooms for some time to relax before dinner. Severus noticed that Pettigrew had a nervous twitch when he walked, and he was constantly glancing in different directions, including over his shoulder, paranoid and afraid.

Severus pretended to be indifferent, but he couldn't help but sneer at Pettigrew's cowardly demeanor. Everything about the Gryffindor boy was pitiful and pathetic, and Severus wondered if he would be better turning around and forgetting the entire plan.

But no, a small, annoyingly persistent voice nagged inside his mind, you will be the better man and will offer your assistance, if only to help protect Lily and yourself in the long run.

Severus watched as Pettigrew turned the last corner and was now headed up the stairs to the owlery. He watched a minute, then followed him up the steps. Severus observed Pettigrew quietly from the door, allowing the other boy enough time to select an owl and

send off the letter with it. Once the task was complete, Severus entered the room, and Peter spun around, startled. Severus saw a spell start to form on the trembling lips, but with a fierce flick of his wand, Severus disarmed Peter, leaving him shaking by the window, much in the same manner he had been when Mulciber had attacked him.

"Abysmal, Pettigrew," Severus sneered.

"W-what're you playing at, Snape?" demanded Pettigrew half-heartedly.

Severus proceeded farther into the room, uttering a clipped word with every measured step he took. "Had I been an enemy, I would have caught you with your guard down yet again, Pettigrew. How predictable that not a word I told you weeks ago has had any effect."

Severus stopped and had to refrain from smirking outwardly. He was very much in professor-mode right now and was finding immense joy in seeing Pettigrew cower. When Peter looked like he might cry, though, Severus felt his old habit crumbling under the weight of his newly-acquired sympathy for others in this lifetime.

He roughly reached for Peter's hand and shoved his wand back in it. Peter snatched his hand back as if he had been burned, cradling it in a disturbingly similar manner as he had when his hand had been silver.

"Luckily for you, I am not an enemy," Severus stated simply, daring Pettigrew, challenging him to draw upon what little courage he possessed.

"And I'm supposed to believe you, just because you stopped those boys from harming me once?" Pettigrew demanded, standing slightly straighter.

Emboldened by Peter's resolve, Severus said, "That's better. If you can talk back to me, surely you could find something better to say to bullies such as Mulciber than mere whimpers? But speaking isn't enough, and it's mostly blowing hot air, anyway. Speaking your way out of trouble is something your simple mind will never be able to

grasp," Severus stated, smirking, his habitual enjoyment of insulting the intelligence of lesser mortals resurfacing.

A large part of him was glad he still retained much of his old personality. He was still Severus Snape, after all, and his biting tongue, cruel though it might be, had also forced others to step out of their comfort zones and face him (and far worse enemies) like men. He thought witheringly of failed Occlumency lessons with Harry Potter.

"You- you're the rudest g-git I've ever met," Pettigrew said defensively, trying to step around Severus.

"True though your assessment might be, Wormtail, I could still be instrumental in instructing you on the *proper* way of defending yourself. You started to learn nonverbal spells last year, and if I'm not mistaken, which I know I am not, you have the ability to transform into a rat."

"H-how did you k-know that?" Pettigrew stuttered, fear in his eyes.

"Ah, an illegal Animagus admits it by just his scared tone... and you aren't alone, are you? That is not that point, Pettigrew. The very fact that you *can* perform advanced magic such as transforming yourself into an animal proves that you are not as inept at magic as you believe... or as you would have others believe."

"What? You think I'm putting up a front, pretending I can't perform certain spells?" Peter asked.

"I think you hide behind your cowardice. I think you use your fear of confrontation as a shield and a wall, yes. You may never measure up to be a highly skilled wizard, Pettigrew, but you don't fool me for a second. You are sneaky and self-serving, and to hide behind stupidity when you're actually more intelligent than you let on makes you both a fool and brilliant in an oddly twisted way."

Peter wasn't sure if he had just been complimented or insulted, but realized it had been both. Frowning, Peter finally posed, "And what am I supposed to do, Snape? You told me last time I ought to be willing to sacrifice myself for others if it came to that, but that's- that's ridiculous! How many people d'you honestly think would do that? It's

not just me that I'm worried about, anyway. Mulciber threatened to hurt my mum. You lost your mum earlier this year. If anyone would know what it's like to lose a mother, I'd think you'd be a little more understanding."

Severus thought his ears might fall off, for he couldn't believe what he was hearing. For once, Peter Pettigrew was thinking about someone other than himself!

"I do understand what it feels like... to lose a mother," Severus said somberly. "You say you wonder how many people would actually sacrifice themselves, but let me ask you: Would you die to protect your mother?"

"Y-yes," Peter said hesitantly.

Severus wasn't entirely convinced, for he also knew Peter was likely to join the Death Eaters if coerced into thinking it would protect his mother. He speculated if that had been at least part of Peter's reason for joining ranks with the Death Eaters before. While he couldn't be sure, and it certainly would do no good to inquire with this Peter in this lifetime, he felt he had hit the right spot. Peter's weakness could be strengthened if he cared to take the time.

"Then perhaps you ought to start by learning how to properly and effectively duel," Severus stated. "Your *friends* have no doubt taught you how to use spells on others for the sake of teasing, but that is not going to be enough. Besides, if I recall correctly, you did more laughing and observing than actual spell-casting."

Peter reddened, knowing full-well that Severus was referring to the many occasions when the Marauders had attacked him. In disbelief, he asked, "And I suppose you're willing to teach me?"

"Teach you, use you for target practice, tire you out, make you afraid to look behind your back... Wait, you're already afraid to look behind your back, but yes, I suppose."

Severus noticed the nervous excitement in Peter's eyes and scoffed at him.

"Really, Wormtail," he said witheringly, "you need to stop it with the admiration. Trust me, when I'm through with you, you may wish you hadn't agreed."

Peter shivered a little, but didn't protest.

"Do you agree, then?" Severus inquired smoothly.

"Y-yes," Peter stuttered, then nodded. Finding his voice, he said more calmly, "Yes."

"Good. You will meet me tonight in the empty classroom on the third floor, near the painting of the dancing hippogriffs."

That said, Severus left Peter to his thoughts in the owlery and went back downstairs to find Lily. She would no doubt be in the library in their usual study place, and with less than an hour left before dinner, Severus decided against bringing any books. It was unlikely they would get any studying accomplished.

When Severus entered the library, he avoided Madam Pince's eyes. The hawklike woman glared at him, daring him to make a sound. Severus and Lily had become disruptive on more than one occasion in the library so far this year, and as Severus wandered past several tables and shelves of books, he idly wondered if the librarian would try to have them kicked out of the library permanently.

Finding Lily, Severus took a seat next to her as Lily turned to greet him.

"Hey, Sev," she said. "I was starting to think you weren't going to show."

"Sorry," he mumbled. "I was, ah, sidetracked."

"And you didn't bring your books because of this sidetrack?" she asked curiously.

"I didn't think we'd have time to properly study, what with how close it is to dinner already," Severus explained.

Lily continued to give him a quizzical look. "Are you going to enlighten me as to what sidetracked you?"

"Peter Pettigrew," Severus stated. "I followed him up to the owlery and had another talk with him."

"Sev, don't take this the wrong way, but why the sudden interest in Pettigrew? I know he admires you and all, but I'm just surprised you would take the time to talk with him after he was part of the group that caused you so much pain for so long."

"You don't seem to have a problem with Lupin," Severus pointed out mildly.

"Remus is different. Yes, he should've stood up to his friends when they picked on you, but he didn't partake in the 'fun,' as they so bluntly used to call it. Then again, Potter and Black *have* left you alone for quite some time now."

"Pettigrew is different from Potter and Black, too, although not in the same way as Lupin. While Lupin lacks much of a backbone, Pettigrew is so cowardly, it's just downright humiliating for those around him and pathetic to the core. Call it taking pity on the sorry excuse for a wizard, but with this war coming, people need to be prepared, Lily."

"Wait, you're planning on personally training him?" Lily questioned incredulously.

Severus had to admit she had a good point. Not very long ago, he had wanted nothing to do with this war. He had deluded himself into believing he could have Lily all to himself, and they could somehow run off and hide away, but in the back of his mind, he knew that had never been a possible reality.

"Yes."

"But why him?" Lily persisted. "He's not the only one who could use a little help."

"I can't train a whole army of wizards, Lily," Severus tried to reason.

"I'm not saying you should, Sev," Lily replied gently, taking his hand in hers. "You've been through so much as it is, and you've already done so much."

Her eyes were locked directly on his, and he felt her intense gaze penetrating his insides. Lily didn't know Legilimency, Severus knew for a fact, but he felt completely unhinged in that moment. It was as if she could see everything he had been through in his other life, and that scared and unnerved him.

Swallowing, Severus croaked, "How did you know?"

"Know?" Lily echoed, her gaze broken.

"About everything-"

"You've been through?" she finished. She squeezed his hand. "I've been right there with you through much of it, Sev, and for the parts I wasn't there for you, I'm sorry. I meant... losing your mum, growing up in a broken household, being picked on by Potter and his friends, and the pressure you had from your own house, and I- Sev, there was a time I didn't believe you when you told me what Black had done to you. I didn't want to believe Remus was really what you said he is, and I nagged you about your friends, and for a while, I was scared, Sev, so scared I was lose you to them."

As Lily spoke her confession, her voice wavered and cracked. Severus saw tears in the corner of her beautiful eyes, and he desperately wanted nothing more than to sweep her away from that place and kiss all her fears and sorrows away.

"No, Lily, don't cry," Severus murmured gently. "Let's go somewhere else if you want."

Lily shook her head and wiped viciously at the tears. "No," she sniffled. "If we have to leave, people will see that I've been crying. Look, I'm okay now. Stupid of me, really, to cry over what could have been."

"It's not stupid," Severus said. "You had valid reason to be worried, and I'm touched you cared enough to stick around when so many

others would have left long before. *You* are the reason I have become a better man, Lily, and now I can say that what I'm doing, even for someone like Pettigrew, is the result of knowing what's good and right in the world. Until recently, I still doubted myself to make the right decisions."

"You don't give yourself enough credit; you never have, Sev. If you want to help Pettigrew, then help him. Personally, I think it's admirable what you're doing."

"Thank you."

They leaned in to kiss, but not a second after their lips brushed together did they hear the shrieking voice of Madam Pince demanding they leave at once. Severus and Lily broke apart, their earlier sentimental mood shattered in a heartbeat, and as Severus helped Lily collect her things, they scampered out of the library, all the while hearing: "The very idea of such behavior! And seventh years and the Head Boy and Girl, no less! Out, *out!*"

Once they were in the hallway, Lily was the first to release a giggle, which quickly became a fit of laughter. Severus chuckled a little, mostly amused that Lily found Madam Pince's outburst so amusing. They returned Lily's books to her room and headed down to the Great Hall, going to their separate tables.

Dinner was a rather boring affair, but thankfully, Mulciber didn't try to start anything at the table. Severus still kept his eyes fixed on the boy and any other Slytherin who was a supporter of the Dark Lord. Before Severus left, he glanced up at the head table, finding Dumbledore in his usual seat in the middle. The headmaster was deep in conversation with McGonagall to his right, and so didn't notice Severus's gaze. As Severus strode out of the Great Hall, he pondered what it would take for Dumbledore to do something about the reckless Slytherins who were still a problem. Surely their behavior hadn't gone unnoticed.

Severus found the classroom he had instructed Pettigrew to meet him in and waited. He wondered what explanation he would give if they were found by a teacher, but they could always use the excuse that

they were practicing for their N.E.W.T.s... or Severus could remedy that problem with some charms applied to the room.

When Pettigrew still hadn't shown up in thirty minutes, Severus began to think he wouldn't come. It wouldn't have surprised him if that had been the case, but just as he was thinking of leaving, the door squeaked open, and Pettigrew timidly peeked into the room.

"Well, don't just stand there gaping at me like an owl," Severus snapped, annoyed for being kept waiting. "Come in and shut the door behind you."

When Peter complied, Severus instantly secured the door with a charm and set noise wards on the room.

"What are you doing?" Peter asked, standing as far away from Severus as possible.

"We don't need to be disturbed," Severus stated matter-of-factly, "whether by teachers or students, especially your friends. You are here to learn, and as such, I require your utmost attention. You will find, Wormtail, that I am not going to tolerate ineptitude."

"Why d'you call me Wormtail?" Peter demanded.

"Ah, the nickname your friends saw fit to give you when you figured out how to turn into a rat? It simply seems fitting," Severus said with a smirk.

"Just as Snivellus does for you," Peter shot back without thinking, but the moment he said those words, he wished he could grab them and push them back into his mouth. "That is... I mean..."

Taking a series of long, fast strides toward Pettigrew, Severus roughly grabbed the front of his robes and literally lifted him a couple of inches off the ground.

His hooked nose only an inch away from Peter's cringing face, Severus hissed, "You will *never* call me that abominable name. Do you understand?" When Peter kept his eyes screwed tightly shut, Severus yelled, "Look at me!"

Scared and shaking, Peter opened one eye a fraction, blinked, and then opened both of them. "Y-yes," he replied in a very small voice, fitting for a rat.

"Good," Severus said, releasing Peter and letting him fall unceremoniously to the floor.

Severus walked a few paces away from the other boy, and when he turned to face him, saw that Peter was still sitting on the floor, a miserable heap of clothes and tears.

"Stand up!" Severus barked. "If you expect to learn anything, you would do well to compose yourself and stop snivelling. You and your friends thought it amusing to baptize me with a nickname which means to be a pathetic, whimpering mess. I see it's much more appropriate for you."

Peter slowly stood, but he backed away from Severus, going toward the door. He tried to open it, but to no avail.

"Let me out," Peter whispered.

Severus heard every word, but he pretended not to understand. "What was that?" he asked, challenging Peter to say it louder.

"I said... LET ME OUT!" Peter cried, now banging on the door with a fury Severus hadn't seen in him before.

Holy shit. What an effect I've had on him already.

Knowing his strategy was working, Severus called mockingly, "That's right! Get mad, Wormtail! Cry for someone to come save your sorry ass! Well, guess what? No one can hear you! You're all alone with me, your enemy, and now you're at my mercy! What are you going to do?"

Wormtail was sobbing, crouched at the bottom of the door. Severus carefully approached him, waiting for the moment of truth: to see if he would make or break the other boy. Severus was almost upon Wormtail, ready to disarm him and place him in a body bind, as to display what could happen in a scenario where Peter refused to

defend himself. Severus raised his wand to nonverbally cast *Expelliarmus*, but then he was hit with a rushing wind, which knocked him over, the anger of it wild and utterly unbound.

Then Peter was standing over him, tears still running down his cheeks, still trembling violently, but he glared down at Severus.

"You stop it," Peter breathed. "You tell me I can't call you names. Well, then you stop being such a bloody hypocrite, Snape, and stop calling me names."

Severus lay on the floor for many long seconds, surprised more than anything, but a part of him was glowing with pride on the inside. He would never show it, but he was glad Wormtail had finally shown he was capable of fighting back.

Finally sitting up, Severus simply nodded, then stood. "Well, you finally learned something," he stated, in a voice all-too-calm for Peter's liking.

"What are you talking about?" Peter asked, once again afraid.

"Idiot," Severus scoffed. "Didn't you think for one moment that *maybe* this was the exact effect I intended all my relentless taunting to have on you?"

Peter gaped at him, at a loss for words. "You- you bastard!" he suddenly yelled. "You-"

"Call me whatever horrible names you want, Wormtail. I honestly don't care, but I think my way of training worked. You needed a good smack in the face."

"You seemed pretty upset a few minutes ago when I called you Sniv-"

"Don't push it," Severus said repressively. "I think that's enough for your lesson today. Are you still willing to learn, or have I scared you away?"

"I, uh... can I bring a friend next time?" Peter asked hopefully.

Severus scowled, then sneered. "Surely not Black or Potter?"

"No, Remus."

Severus considered. "Very well, but I will also be bringing a friend."

Severus removed the charms from the room and watched, half-amused, as Peter scampered out of the classroom, proving that a bit of fear was a good thing.

I'll have much to tell Lily, Severus thought. Surely she will want to join me next time.

He left the room and returned to his own bedroom, impressed with himself that he could turn Pettigrew's weakness into a strength.

Chapter Fifty-Five

"How did teaching Pettigrew go?" inquired Lily the following day after classes were over.

Severus and she were outside, enjoying a rare mild afternoon on the autumn day. As they strolled around the lake, several other students grouped about, basking in the sun and sharing jokes and stories.

"I believe it was effective," Severus replied, smiling deviously.

"What's with that look?" Lily asked, both amused and a little afraid.

"I used his weakness, his fear, against him. I taunted the sorry bastard into really getting pissed enough to fight back. It worked, just as I imagined it would."

"I don't know if I want to know what exactly happened in that room," Lily groaned. "Sev, you didn't do anything, er, bad to him?"

"Just words," he said nonchalantly, shrugging. "That was enough."

"And it actually *worked*?" Lily asked incredulously, her eyebrows raised.

"That's why I advise you to come with me next time," Severus said mildly, eager for her reaction.

"Me, come with you? And there's going to be a 'next time?'"

Severus nodded. "Of course. Pettigrew is bringing Lupin, and I said I'd bring a friend, too. It would be more effective to have multiple duelers, and this time, I shouldn't have to mock him into fighting back as hard... unless he clams up again and refuses to fight back."

"This will be interesting, to say the very least," Lily agreed, intrigued.

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A couple of days later after another gruelling day of classes, Severus arranged for another session of dueling. As Lily walked alongside

Severus to the empty classroom where Peter and he had fought two days prior, she was anxious to see what would happen.

"Do you plan to be as hard on him as you were last time?" she asked.

"That will depend," Severus replied with a smirk.

They reached the correct door and entered. Once inside, Severus noticed Peter already there with Lupin. He set the same charms on the room as he had last time.

"Hello, Lily, Snape," Lupin greeted them, nodding.

"Lupin," Severus returned curtly.

"Good evening, Remus," Lily said with a pleasant smile at her other friend. Her eyes caught Peter, who was half-hiding behind Lupin and said to him, "Hello, er... Peter." She felt a little strange addressing him by his given name, but since she was on a first name basis with the other two boys, she figured it would be the polite thing to do.

"Hi, L-Lily," Peter said, unable to keep a small, ridiculous smile off his face as he withdrew from Lupin some. Like most boys, he found her attractive and kind, but the moment Severus glared at Peter, he wiped the smile off his face and slunk back behind Lupin.

"I trust Pettigrew has informed you of what occurred during our last duel?" Severus inquired, looking at Lupin.

"Yes," Lupin replied, sounding disapproving. "D'you really think it was necessary to be so harsh on him, though? Surely there are better ways of learning that are equally effective."

Severus thought of Lupin as the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher that one year and knew he wasn't horrible at dueling. Plus, he had been in the Order and could thus fight well, but he wouldn't dare give the other boy reason to think his methods better than his own.

"But they were effective nonetheless, Lupin," Severus stated firmly. "If you have a better suggestion, I would like to see it. Go on, then. Force Pettigrew to fight you."

"Er, right," Lupin said awkwardly. Lupin stepped away from Peter and muttered something to him.

Peter looked confused and lacking for a brain as Lupin continued to take several paces away from him. He stood directly facing him.

"All right, Peter; disarm me," he instructed.

Peter raised his wand and called out, "Expelliarmus!"

Peter's shriek made Lupin's wand shake a little in his outstretched hand, but nothing more. Lily watched with pity and shook her head, wishing Peter had just done the damn spell effectively. She knew what was coming as she watched the smirk on Severus's face widen.

"You call that dueling?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "Just standing there like an idle idiot and asking him to disarm you is hardly realistic, Lupin. And see what I mean? Unless Pettigrew is properly scared, he can't muster up enough strength to fight properly."

Lupin shot a glare at Severus. "And I suppose you're going to show me the proper way to duel?" he asked sarcastically.

Not a second after Lupin finished speaking did he feel something like a shove in the chest, and the next thing he knew, he had fallen over, and Severus was gazing down upon him.

"The first thing you need to learn is never to let your guard down," Severus said, almost lazily. "That was a nonverbal *Petrificus Totalus*."

Lupin felt the body bind released, and in frustration and annoyance, he stood and brushed the dust off his robes.

"You could have at least given me fair warning," he shot at Severus without thinking.

"Haven't you listened to anything I've said?" Severus questioned, now irritated.

Lily chose that moment to step in between her friends. "Severus, Remus, stop it. I thought we were supposed to be learning and teaching here?"

"That's a good point, Lily," Lupin said, his teeth clenched. "What I'd like to know is why Snape thinks he knows how to teach. You're not a professor," he told Severus.

All the while, Peter was standing in the background, watching the scene unfold. He was amused by the quarreling that was ensuing between Lupin and Severus and released a quiet chuckle. Hearing this, Severus turned and frowned at Peter.

"You think this is funny, do you?" he asked harshly. "Well, it won't be very funny when you find yourself in the middle of a battlefield in the upcoming war."

"Who said anything about us fighting in a war?" Lupin questioned incredulously.

Severus and Lupin began to argue, the presence of Lily and Peter forgotten. Peter cringed and made a whimpering sound at the mention of a war, but didn't say anything worthwhile.

Lily, feeling exasperated, flicked her wand quickly at the two squabbling boys. Severus and Lupin each felt a stinging sensation at their wrists and dropped their wands. Both immediately stopped arguing and turned, shocked, toward Lily.

"Lily, what did you do that for?" Severus posed, put out.

"To stop you two from wasting more time," she replied, "and to prove that you have both lost focus of why we're here. Plus, you let your guard down." She smirked at Severus.

Severus picked up his wand, and as Lupin did the same, Lily continued, "So, are you two ready to stop this incessant, ridiculous inanity and start learning?"

"Fine," Severus said curtly, still annoyed at Lupin and more upset at himself for losing control. "Lily, you can work with Lupin. I believe Pettigrew and I will partner up for the time being."

Lily gave a firm nod, and Lupin agreed. Severus stepped away from them and toward Peter, instructing him to prepare himself for a duel. Perhaps Lupin was partially right. They were practicing, after all, and for Peter to learn anything new, he would need to be told how to do those hexes and jinxes.

"I have to wonder if you have even been awake during any of the Defense classes these past seven years, Pettigrew," Severus sneered.

"O-of course I have!" Peter defended himself. Severus noticed Peter's hand clutch his wand tighter.

There we go. Get him angry enough, and it will improve his performance, Severus thought with satisfaction.

"Then prove it!" Severus called back at him.

Beside him, Lily cast him a quick look, which distracted her, and she was knocked over by Lupin's Stunner. Severus wasn't paying any attention to Lily and Lupin beside him, though. Staring intently straight ahead, he waited for Peter to do something.

"Impedimenta!" Peter shouted.

Severus easily blocked the jinx and shook his head in disgust. "Really, Pettigrew," he taunted. "The whole point is to not say the spell out loud. Didn't you learn that last year? You're giving me an easy advantage over you by shouting it like that."

"I c-can't do nonverbal spells," Peter protested, his lip quivering.

Next to them, Lupin and Lily stopped dueling. "Maybe you ought to let him speak them for the time being," Lupin suggested.

Severus glowered at Lupin, but before he could refute Lupin's proposal, Lily cut in, "That's not a bad idea. Sev, you know he's not as advanced as you. Just... give it a try?"

Lily had posed the question so sweetly, Severus sighed as he looked at her and relented. "Fine," he said tersely, focusing back on Peter.

If either Lupin or Peter were surprised by Severus's reaction to Lily, they didn't make it known, for which Severus was inwardly grateful. As much as he was more than willing to let his guard down around Lily, he was uncomfortable doing so around most others, especially two of the Marauders.

"Okay, Pettigrew, try the Impediment Jinx again. I'll let it hit me and see how strong it is."

Peter nodded, feeling a bit better, and shouted the jinx again. Severus felt its effect a moment later, as he was halted from moving forward, but after a second, the sensation wore off.

To be truthful, it wasn't half-bad of an attempt. He simply nodded his approval at Pettigrew. "Now, try something else. I want to see what other jinxes and hexes you are proficient at," Severus explained.

The next half-hour was spent going through a plethora of spells learned over the years in Defense Against the Dark Arts. After Peter demonstrated he could do a weak Stunner and Jelly Legs Jinx, among other things, and that he was unable to do several others, Severus began with the basic Disarming Charm, going over it until Peter improved.

After a couple of hours, Severus found his nerves fried. He no longer had any patience left to deal with Peter's ineptitude and lack of confidence.

"That's enough for today," he finally announced. Beside him, he saw Lily and Lupin both heave sighs of relief.

"In two days, we continue," Severus stated, booking no room for argument.

Peter didn't say anything, but Lily and Lupin nodded their consent. Surprised they actually wanted to return, Severus dismissed Peter and Lupin, waiting for them to exit before he left with Lily.

"That was useful," Lily said once they were in the corridor.

"Even for you?" Severus asked, baffled.

"Of course," Lily returned with a smile. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"You're great already," Severus said, reminded of the shy boy he had once been around Lily, standing in awe at her power.

Lily's cheeks turned pink. "Even though you were hard on him at first, I think it's wonderful what you're doing for Peter," Lily whispered. "And for me, working with Remus was excellent. We can all use the practice."

"Some more than others," Severus muttered, wondering if Pettigrew would ever show marked improvement.

There had been a small amount of improvement during their session, but it wasn't enough. Two days later, the four of them spent another evening practicing spells and dueling. The work was slowly paying off as the days passed, however, and before Severus knew it, they had been practicing for a full two weeks. It was the day before the Hogsmeade outing, and they were meeting yet again.

Severus and Lily arrived before Lupin and Peter this time. While they were waiting for the other two to arrive, the door opened with a resounding bang, and in strolled Potter and Black, followed shortly by Lupin and Pettigrew.

Severus immediately went on the defensive, demanding, "What are *they* doing here?"

"Calm down, Snape," Potter lazily said, rolling his eyes. "We simply wondered where it was Remus and Peter were going so many nights these past couple of weeks. It took a while to get them to speak, but see, we followed them last time. It was a shame we couldn't get into the room-"

"That's because I warded the door to prevent intruders from getting in!" Severus exclaimed angrily. "You weren't invited, so I suggest you leave! The door is right there."

"Sev," Lily whispered by his side.

Severus, however, wasn't to be pacified. He ignored Lily's plea and took another step toward Potter and Black. "Why did you let them come?" he asked hotly, glaring at Lupin and Pettigrew.

"They're my friends, too," Lupin stated.

Pettigrew nodded. "If you're agreeing to help me, why not help-

"They don't need my help, and why the hell would I want to assist them?" Severus implored.

"Severus!" Lily exclaimed.

This time, Severus turned around. "What?"

"Maybe you ought to calm down like James asked," she suggested. "Are you here to learn or to taunt him?" Lily asked Potter and Black.

"To observe," Potter said with a shrug.

Black frowned. "We wanted to see how you're tormenting our friend, Snape," he said darkly.

"I haven't been tormenting him, Black," Severus argued.

"That's not the way I would interpret it, from what I've heard. Are you teaching him that curse you used on me all those months ago? Hoping to spread a little Dark Magic just in time for the rising of the Death Eaters?"

There was nothing teasing in Sirius Black's tone. He sounded genuinely angry, and Severus was offended deeply by his accusations.

"You have no right, Black, no right to come in here and spout out such nonsense, especially after I've gone out of my way to *help* your little friend," Severus said coldly.

As Severus spoke, he was shaking with rage, and Lily came to his side and placed a hand on his arm, right over the spot where the Dark Mark would have been in his other life.

"You lay off him, Black," Lily ground out, piercing a filthy look at him.

"Lily's right," Lupin intervened, trying to sound reasonable. "Sirius, mate, can't you just... let go of whatever it is you're so intent on holding onto?"

"No!" Black yelled, turning on his heel and leaving the room, the door banging shut behind him.

Potter had the wherewithal to look embarrassed by his friend's reckless behavior. "Er, sorry about that," he muttered. "But can I stay and watch? Seriously, Snape, I know from what Peter and Remus told me that you've been hard on him," he said, indicating Peter, "but I'm surprised that you're taking the time to teach him. That's... not something I would have expected from you."

Severus was frowning, still not pleased with the situation, but he nodded shortly. "Very well, Potter, but don't get in the way."

They partnered off, and Potter stepped to the side to observe. Severus worked with Peter, as was usually the case, but after some time, he worked with Lupin, and then with Lily, eventually returning to working with Peter. Of the four, Peter obviously needed the most help, and since Severus had taken it upon himself to teach, he felt it was ultimately his responsibility to train him well.

Over the past couple of weeks, Peter had shown marked improvement, even though he still had to utter the incantations aloud most of the time. Peter had just sent a Stunner Severus's way, which he blocked easily, and Severus returned with *Incarcerous*. Surprisingly, Peter managed a Shield Charm just in a nick of time, blocking the ropes from binding him.

Without thinking, Severus called, "Good, Pettigrew!"

The moment he said the words, Severus flushed a shade of red that clashed with his normally pale skin. Peter looked shocked and just stood there, gaping. Severus glanced around the room, noticing that Lily, Lupin, and Potter were all staring back at him as well, Potter appearing the most floored.

Severus cleared his throat and found his authoritative voice, and he practically commanded, "Now, show me what you've really got, Pettigrew. Let's see if you have yet mastered a nonverbal attack!"

Peter swallowed nervously and held up a shaky hand, his wand clearly unsteady. Severus could tell it was taking every ounce of Peter's concentration, but he remained silent, hoping he wouldn't have to resort to taunting him to invoke a reaction. Severus decidedly wouldn't block whatever came his way, as he was curious to see if Peter could finally perform nonverbal magic.

Just when Severus began to grow impatient, thinking Peter wasn't going to deliver, he felt his wand fly out of his hand, and he watched in amazement as it flew through the air and landed ten feet away. Four other pairs of eyes watched simultaneously, and as soon as the wand landed on the floor, Potter whooped and was at Pettigrew's side, clapping him on the shoulder.

"That was bloody brilliant, Wormtail!" Potter exclaimed, impressed by his friend's performance.

A few seconds later, Lupin was on Pettigrew's other side, remarking, "Very well done, Peter!"

Lily grinned and went to retrieve Severus's wand. She handed it to him and joined him as they watched the three Marauders interact. Peter was smiling, an expression of confidence never before seen on his face. He couldn't seem to find words to define his euphoria. Severus hung back with Lily, inwardly proud that all the hard work he had been pouring into these sessions had finally paid off.

"You really are a good teacher, Sev," Lily whispered to him. "And to think you said you'd never want to teach."

The irony of her words echoed through Severus's mind. He hadn't enjoyed teaching, at least not Potions. While he loved the subject, it had always been Defense Against the Dark Arts he had longed to teach. The one year he had been given the job, he hadn't been able to enjoy it, as he knew he would have to leave it by the end of the year at the very latest, never quite sure when Dumbledore was going to ask him to do that dastardly deed of killing him.

Those thoughts caused Severus's mood to darken, and Lily noticed his scowl and a premature line of worry creased between his eyes.

"Sev?" she asked softly.

Severus merely shook his head. The Marauders were quieting down, and next thing Severus knew, Potter was addressing him.

"D'you think I could join you next time?" he asked.

"What?" Severus returned, his mind having been elsewhere.

Potter interpreted this as Severus refusing, and he pressed, "C'mon, Snape. You let two of my best friends come here these past two weeks, and Peter has gotten much better at defending himself."

"Fine," Severus muttered, not pleased that Potter wished to join them, but Potter hadn't really done anything to warrant prohibiting him from joining their sessions. More than that, though, Severus was still distracted by thoughts of his other life. Shaking himself back to reality, he added sourly, "But you're not to invite Black. I don't need him here causing trouble."

Potter's face fell a little, but he nodded. "It'll be hard convincing him that I want to come, but I don't think he'd want to come and see you, anyway, Snape." He laughed.

Severus only scowled and said, "That's enough for tonight. We'll meet again on Monday."

After he undid the charms on the room, Potter, Lupin, and Pettigrew ushered each other out, leaving Severus and Lily behind. Lily gazed upon Severus with concern in her eyes.

"Sev, are you okay?" she inquired gently.

"It's... nothing," Severus said, his shoulders slumping. "Well, that's not true. It is something, but I just don't know how to talk about it. Maybe I'm just worn out." He forced a weak smile.

"I can see why," Lily remarked, roping her arms around his neck and pulling his head down so she could kiss him. "Go to sleep early tonight, Sev. Tomorrow is a Hogsmeade day, and I'd love to spend the entire day with you there."

"All right," Severus agreed, thoughts of spending the whole day with Lily tomorrow improving his mood.

"That's better," Lily said with an encouraging smile. "That's better."

Chapter Fifty-Six

Saturday dawned, and from the looks of the thick, black clouds looming in the sky, rain was threatening to fall. Severus sighed as he looked out his window that morning. While he normally enjoyed rainy days, today was different. With the visit to Hogsmeade, he was hoping for a sunny day, the chilly type in late autumn when the crispness of the air smelled of dried leaves and smoky fires blazing in homes, the image of the interior being warm and comfortable, feeling like a fuzzy sweater or the embrace of a loved one.

The weather wouldn't dampen his spirit, though. Despite his mood at the end of the previous day, being reminded of his teaching days and how they had terminated, Severus was going to have a good day today. He had promised Lily a visit to Hogsmeade like they had never had before, and so, he left his bed and proceeded into his private bathroom to shower, making sure he washed his hair thoroughly.

After finishing in the bathroom with his other morning ablutions, he found his nicest robes and put them on. They weren't dress robes, and since all of Severus's Muggle clothes were secondhand from his father and were a few years old and therefore out of style, he didn't want to wear them, especially to a wizarding village. While Lily had nice Muggle clothing she sometimes wore on weekends, Severus chose to wear robes. It was convenient and easier, for as any man would contest, choosing what to wear was not usually very high on his list of priorities.

Severus stopped to examine himself one last time in the mirror before heading out. He didn't normally give so much attention to his physical appearance, but today was to be special. One of the things he was grateful for in his new life was to have his youth back, at least in the physical sense. Severus had been quite young, especially by wizarding standards, when he had died, but he thought he had looked prematurely older. The young face staring back at him had taken some getting used to, but to no longer have the lines wrought by worry and stress and the yellowish pallor that his skin and teeth had taken on as he had grown older was nice.

And his hair... well, he had made sure to keep it as clean as possible ever since returning to life. Like most teenagers, the amount of oil produced was more than it would be during other times in life, but the jokes about Severus being the "greasy git" had mostly stopped. Part of the reason Severus had always liked his hair long was so he could hide behind it, but he didn't let it hang in his face nowadays like he used to. Tucking it behind his ears was preferable, and as Lily would tease him, she wanted to see his face. Thinking of Lucius Malfoy's aristocratic ponytail at the base of his neck, Severus wondered how the style would look on him. He certainly didn't have a hair tie, but he found a single sock and transfigured it into a simple black tie and pulled his hair back. He gazed at himself, unsure of the look. Should he take the ponytail out? Did it just make his nose appear bigger?

No, it wasn't so terrible, Severus concluded. Satisfied, he left the room. He had what he considered the perfect plans for today with Lily... a whole day just with her! As he walked down the hall to breakfast, Severus allowed himself to smile slightly.

He didn't notice the group of Hufflepuff girls, who couldn't have been older than third years, staring at him with something akin to awe. A couple of them giggled, but it was a delightful laughter, and Severus immediately wiped the smile off his face. His dreamy expression had entertained the girls, and as he was now looked upon in a favorable light by some of the student body, thirteen-year-olds were going to be attracted to an older boy.

Severus thought of sending a glare in their direction for a minute, if only for amusement, but his mood was so good, he couldn't muster it. He simply nodded at them in passing and went on his way. He wasn't going to provoke them with a response in words.

When Severus finally reached the Great Hall, it was already quite full, as he had taken longer than usual to get ready. He found Lily sitting next to Mary Macdonald, and catching her eye, smiled at her. Lily returned the smile, her eyes roaming up and down his body, liking what she saw.

"Wow, Lily," Mary murmured to her friend. "Your boyfriend does clean up rather nicely."

"I like to think so," Lily replied, truly impressed by what she saw.

James glanced in Severus's direction as the girls spoke, his eyes following the Slytherin boy until he sat down at his table.

"Am I to assume he has something up his sleeve?" James asked Lily teasingly.

"Maybe," Lily said nonchalantly, not wanting to give away anything and enjoying the reaction she might get out of James. Honestly, she didn't know what Severus had planned for today, but she knew he had been looking forward to this day for a long time.

"Hmm, I suppose it's a good thing I'm no longer competing with him for your affection," James replied lazily, taking a bite of egg.

Lily watched the smug expression on his face, confused. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, Mary hasn't told you?"

"Told me what?" Lily inquired, turning to regard her friend.

Mary blushed and said quietly, "James and I are dating."

"Oh, well, congratulations," Lily said graciously, happy for her friend. "When did this start?"

"It's only been a week," Mary explained.

"Only a week?!" James asked in mock shock.

Mary and Lily giggled, and James winked at Sirius, who was sitting next to him. Lily sobered when she noticed the sullen expression on Sirius's handsome face.

"What's wrong with you?" she questioned, perhaps not in the most sensitive voice.

"Nothing I want to share with you, Evans," Sirius muttered, turning away from James and the others.

Lily cast James a concerned, puzzled look, but James only shrugged, obviously not wanting to talk about it. Across from James and Sirius, Remus and Peter were in conversation, so Sirius was left to himself to eat in silence. As Lily watched the Marauders for a minute, she wondered if they were growing apart. A year ago, she probably wouldn't have cared, but working with Remus and Peter these past two weeks had made her grow closer to them. While she had been friends with Remus for years, they hadn't been particularly close, but now she felt she could call him a good friend. And James... well, James had matured a lot in the past year. He was rarely the prat he used to be, but Sirius didn't seem to like the changes in his friends. Lily frowned, knowing this was partly because of Severus's involvement in their lives, but Severus hadn't done anything wrong. He had been more willing to be civil with the group of boys who had bullied him for years than he ever had.

Lily finished her breakfast, suddenly eager to leave the discomfort and tension around her. She walked to the Slytherin table, receiving a few glowers, but most of the students simply ignored her. That was a vast improvement over the past, when she would have heard "Mudblood" and other such obscenities muttered amongst the students.

"Good morning, Sev," she greeted Severus when she came upon him.

Severus wiped his face with the napkin and pushed the plate away.

"Good morning, Lily," he returned. Standing, he added, "Good timing. I just finished."

They walked out of the Great Hall and into the Entrance Hall.

"We still have a half-hour before they will let us go," Severus observed.

"We need to get our cloaks, anyway," Lily said.

"Do you want to go to your room first?" he asked.

"Sure."

As they strolled down the corridor and stairs, Lily and Severus talked quietly. They retrieved Lily's cloak from her room, and then proceeded to Severus's room to get his.

Standing right outside his door, Lily said softly, "You look really... wow, Sev."

"Really wow?" Severus asked, chuckling.

"Mmm," Lily replied, kissing him. She reached behind his neck and gently grasped the ponytail, running her hand over his hair. "I like it."

"I thought I'd try something different," Severus replied, feeling warm all of a sudden.

"You didn't have to get so dressed up-"

"I wanted to... for you."

"But I didn't put on anything special. We still have time. Should I go back and change?" Lily asked, starting to fret a little.

Severus placed a long, thin finger delicately on her lips, silencing her. "You look lovely," he said. "You could go without wearing anything, and you'd look lovely." Severus said those words without realizing what he was uttering, and as soon as they escaped his lips, his pale cheeks turned red.

Lily blushed, too, and bit her bottom lip, her mouth slowly curling upward into a tantalizing smile. "Oh, Sev," she giggled.

"I'm sorry-"

"Shh, silly boy," Lily said sweetly, now silencing him with a gentle finger to the lips. "You've nothing to apologize for. You think I don't return the sentiment?"

"I, uh..." Severus was at a loss for words.

Realizing there was no need to elaborate further, Lily grabbed his hand and pulled him down the hall. "Come on, Sev; snap out of it!" she joked.

Dazed, and pleasantly so, Severus nodded mutely and allowed Lily to lead him down the hall and back toward the front doors. By the time they reached the Entrance Hall, students were leaving the castle, and they joined them, proceeding out the large oaken doors, down the steps, and on the gravel pathway leading to the gates. The walk to Hogsmeade took about fifteen minutes, but with the chatter of students all around them, the momentary silence they had enjoyed, awkwardness and all, dissipated. Caught in the thrill of an entire day together, Severus and Lily walked faster than many of the students around them. At one point, Lily tugged on Severus's hand, saying, "Your legs are longer than mine, Sev! I can't keep up if you insist on going that fast!"

"Right, sorry," Severus mumbled, eager to reach the village.

Once they were in Hogsmeade, Severus said, "Well, whatever you want to do, we can do, Lily. Where do you want to go first?"

Lily, thinking Severus still had something planned he was refusing to share, smiled knowingly. "All right," she said. "I think we're overdue for a visit to Honeydukes."

Severus didn't care much for sweets, but he obliged Lily and let her lead the way to the candy shop. The place was already packed with students, and it was impossible to maneuver one's way through the milling crowd without bumping into someone else. Severus resigned himself to this fact and held fast to Lily's hand. She surveyed the new items, picking some of the more entertaining ones up and asking Severus for his opinion. He made a face of disgust at every sweet she held up.

"If you must purchase something that will make your teeth rot, why not just settle for Chocolate Frogs? At least they're harmless," Severus suggested.

"And we used to be so intent on collecting the Wizard Cards when we were kids," Lily laughed. "Okay, Sev, lead the way."

Severus found the Chocolate Frog display and asked, "How many do you want?"

"One for each of us?" she suggested. "We can find a quiet spot in The Three Broomsticks before it gets crowded and swap cards for old times' sake."

Nodding, Severus grabbed two Chocolate Frogs and paid for them. They exited the shop as quickly as possible, and Severus was relieved to be in the cold again. Honeydukes had been too hot and stuffy. They went to The Three Broomsticks next and found a table in the corner. Severus ordered two butterbeers, still wishing he could order something that wasn't so juvenile, but all seventeen-year-olds drank the sweet drink.

Once they were settled with their drinks, Lily raised her bottle.

"I say we toast," she said heartily.

"Okay, to what?" Severus asked, amused.

"To us, Sev; to us."

"I'll drink to that any day," Severus said, fully smiling.

They clinked their bottles together and took a long swig each.

"Now, open your Chocolate Frog, Sev!" Lily urged.

"And I suppose you'll want me to eat it, too?" Severus inquired, smirking.

"Well, of course."

"Lily, if this keeps up, my teeth are going to rot away by the end of the day," Severus said dryly.

"Just open the card," Lily insisted with an exaggerated roll of the eyes.

"All right, all right," Severus complied, surrendering. He ripped open the package, and the frog immediately tried to jump away. Severus grabbed the chocolate wonder before it could elicit one full jump and

shoved it into his mouth. He chewed the enchanted life out of the thing and took another sip of butterbeer to wash the chocolate down. The sugar from the frog and the beer coated his teeth, and running his tongue over them, Severus winced. "Ugh, too much sweetness for me."

"Perhaps you're right," Lily said sarcastically. Then she kissed him fully on the lips, not caring who saw.

When Severus could breathe again, his eyes large with amazed shock, he remarked, "Maybe not too much sweetness after all."

Lily laughed and ate her frog. They looked at their cards, finding they had both gotten Dumbledore, but exchanged them anyway, shoving them into their pockets. They spent the next hour in the pub, exchanging stories from the years of visits to Hogsmeade. After another round of butterbeers, Severus paid, and they left. They walked down the street some, until coming to the bookstore.

"Do you want to go in?" Severus asked.

"Definitely," Lily agreed.

The moment they stepped inside, a loud crack of thunder echoed across the sky, rattling the building. A couple of seconds later, the rain began to fall.

"We got inside just in time," Lily remarked.

Nodding, Severus led them to their favorite place near the back of the store. They perused the shelves, each finding an interesting title, and sat down near one of the fireplaces to read through their books.

"Today has been perfect," Lily suddenly said, gazing up from her book.

Severus lifted his eyes from the text on the page and closed the book, setting it on his lap. He returned the gaze, watching as the firelight danced across her porcelain face, casting shadows here and there, making her vibrant hair redder, and the little flames in her green eyes beckoned him to come closer... so he did.

"And it's not over yet," Severus said softly. If they had been alone and in private, he would have picked her up and kissed her, but their moment was broken when a group of loud students came bustling past them.

Severus seemed a little irritated by the presence of the others, so Lily asked, "Did you want to go somewhere else?"

"It's still raining," Severus said in a strained voice.

Lily wanted to ask if something was the matter, but with too many people around, she stood and waited for Severus to do the same.

"Did you want that book?" he abruptly asked.

"No, that's okay," Lily lied. She knew he would insist on paying for it, just as he had for the Chocolate Frogs and the butterbeers. Those things weren't expensive, but knowing Severus didn't have much money, she didn't want to put him in that position.

"Let me get the book for you, Lily," Severus insisted. Just as she made to return the book to its original position on the shelf, his hand stilled hers, and he took the book. "I'm buying this one," he said, holding up the book he had been perusing.

"Sev, not to be intrusive, but-"

"I know what you're thinking," Severus said, "but I've got it covered."

Lily hoped he wasn't just saying that to be nice, and not wanting to argue over something trivial, she relented and let him purchase the book for her. They made their way to the front of the bookstore and saw that the rain had eased up, only falling in a drizzle now. Severus muttered a charm to keep them dry, tapping Lily and then himself. He held the bag with the books in one hand and took her hand with the other.

"So, where are we going now?" Lily asked, genuinely curious.

"That, my dear, is a surprise," Severus replied.

By the expression on his face, Lily knew he was up to something, and while she longed to probe further, she kept quiet, not wanting to spoil the surprise. Severus led her down the street far, and they were almost on the edge of town, but he stopped in front of a nondescript store front.

"Where are we?" Lily questioned, but then she read the little sign. "Gina's Jewelers?"

Severus nodded. "Come inside."

Lily had no words, but she let Severus lead the way through the door and into the shop. Once inside, her jaw nearly dropped open in amazement. From the outside, the place seemed like nothing special, but inside, it was larger and spectacularly decorated. Gold and silver jewelry, dressed with diamonds and precious stones, glittered all around her.

"Sev, what-?" Lily tried to ask, but her eyes were fixated on the sheer beauty of what she was experiencing.

Severus nodded to the lady behind the counter, and the woman stepped out of the room, warding the front door, so no one else would be able to enter. Once it was just the two of them, Severus placed the bag with the books on the floor and nervously swallowed. He got down on one knee, taking Lily's hand in both of his and kissing it reverently. His eyes locked with hers for the longest time, and he lost his words. Lily stared intensely back into his eyes, on the verge of tears, waiting with baited breath for what she knew was to come.

"Any ring," Severus finally croaked. He cleared his throat, wishing it would stop constricting, but his heart was thudding heavily in his chest, rebounding all the way up to his ears, and he felt like a thousand butterflies had just gotten loose in his stomach. He felt like he was floating in a drunken euphoric haze, and warmth was penetrating from all sides, adding to the indescribable feeling in his heart. His eyes continued to be locked to those enchanting green orbs, and he found himself lost in them, but then he found the courage to continue.

"Any ring in here is not nearly as beautiful as you, but for you and only you, Lily, I wish to give any ring you desire as a symbol of my heart, which I freely and completely give to you, you and only you, Lily, my heart's deepest desire. Lily, I- I love you beyond anything I could ever say with words, and I know..." he choked, feeling the hot wetness of tears threatening to fall. He blinked, and he felt a stray tear roam slowly down his cheek, but he was so happy, he didn't care. "I know I am not the perfect man by any means, but I swear to you, Lily, I give you everything I have. Lily, will you marry me?"

Lily's face burst into a smile, and the tears spilled over. "Yes, Sev, yes!" she exclaimed, her voice shrill with utter joy. She leapt forward and planted kiss after kiss on his face, and Severus was smiling and laughing, holding her close. They finally locked lips and kissed for a long, long while, embracing tightly, the passion of love such as theirs evident in every small move.

There was so much Severus wished to say, and just as the store's owner came to the front to congratulate the happy couple, a chorus of voices rang outside. Severus heard a long bang, feeling the building shake. He thought for a fleeting second it had simply been the thunder, but he knew that was ridiculous. He cast an apologetic look at Lily as he rushed to the front door and opened it.

Outside, the rain was falling in earnest again, but there was a greenish glow in the clouded darkness. Gasps and cries echoed through the street, and with growing dread in the pit of his stomach, Severus's eyes turned heavenward, but he certainly didn't see anything resembling the heaven he had just left inside that store. No, what he saw was a horrific vision from nightmares that still plagued him in this life.

The Dark Mark was in the sky, leering down over the village, and from an alley a short distance across the street, a girl screamed, "Someone's just been killed!"

Severus withdrew back into the jewelry store and turned a heavy gaze to Lily. "The ring will have to wait," he said grimly.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Severus withdrew back into the jewelry store and turned a heavy gaze to Lily. "The ring will have to wait," he said grimly.

"What happened?" Lily said in a strained voice, worry etched all over her face.

The store owner looked unnerved and shaken as well, but she didn't say anything. It was plain that their deeply romantic moment was ruined by the devastation outside. Hell was in the streets.

"Someone has just been killed," Severus told Lily and the shopkeeper. "The Dark Mark... his sign, Lily... it's in the sky beyond Hogsmeade. His followers place it in the sky whenever they attack, and usually that means someone has been killed."

"You-Know-Who's sign?" Lily asked in a small voice. She was gripping her wand tightly.

Severus nodded. "We need to get the students back to Hogwarts."

Severus wished Lily could stay in the jewelry shop, but as Head Girl, it was just as much her duty as it was his to round up the students and tell them to return to the school. Two teachers would have chaperoned and would need to be informed if they didn't know of the attack already.

"Come on," Severus urged, reaching for Lily's hand. "Do you have a back door?" he asked the shopkeeper.

The witch nodded fervently and directed them to the back of the store. Cautiously, Severus and Lily stepped outside and made their way around the building. Once they reached the main street, mayhem was loose. People were running and screaming in all directions, and amongst the crowd, Severus tried to see if he could spot the Death Eaters responsible for the attack. His eyes caught a blackly-clad figure rounding a corner, opposite of the direction others were going.

"Go to The Three Broomsticks," Severus instructed Lily. "One of the professors, McGonagall, I think, ought to be there. Tell her what

happened, and alert the students along the way. They must get back to Hogwarts immediately."

"And what about you, Sev? Aren't you coming with me?" Lily questioned frantically.

"I'll be along in a minute, Lily. I... I need to know who died."

"But why, Sev? If you go down that alley, you're risking exposing yourself to whoever killed that poor soul. No, I won't let you!"

Severus gazed at Lily with pleading eyes. "Lily, you must!" He grabbed her hand and ran into the street, joining countless others who were panicking.

Above them, the Dark Mark was starting to dissolve, but the greenish haze still hung in the sky, mixing with the clouds. The rain began to fall harder, pounding against their skin, and once they were near the alley where the young girl had screamed murder not more than five minutes ago, Severus released Lily's hand and shoved her into the crowd, quickly putting distance between them. He heard Lily's desperate and angry protests amongst a stream of cries all around him, but he went toward the alley.

"Go back to the school!" Severus bellowed at the students mobbing around him. "Go back! Go!"

He had to know who died... if it was true. He just couldn't leave the poor victim there, not when he felt he should have done something. He racked his brain, trying to remember if Hogsmeade had been similarly attacking during his seventh year before, but nothing came to mind. Lily's cries had long ago died away, and the crowd was quickly thinning out nearby.

Severus held his wand, ready to strike at any moment. His eyes shifted from side-to-side, watching for any sign of the perpetrator, but there was no one there... no one alive, that was. Severus figured the Death Eaters were long gone by now, and a part of him railed to find the sorry bastards and make them pay. Instead, he was left trying to discern the blackness of the alley from the blackness of the limp mass lying on the ground at the dead end straight ahead.

Severus never let down his guard as he approached the body. He hoped against hope that whoever it was wasn't really dead. Maybe they had just been Stunned, but Severus knew better. He had firsthand experience of being on the giving end as a Death Eater, and he knew exactly what that mark in the sky meant.

When Severus was upon the body, he stood facing the person's backside. Severus wouldn't dare touch the body, never trusting what might happen. He flicked his wand, and the body turned over, revealing the face.

Severus's breath caught in his throat.

Gazing back at him with empty eyes was Peter Pettigrew.

"Oh, shit," Severus muttered, shaking his head. He was too shocked for any other emotion to sink in yet. He turned abruptly, checking the alley once again for any sign of somebody being there in the shadows, but he was alone.

Severus muttered, "Mobilicorpus," levitating Peter's body, and then conjured a blanket to cover him. He wondered where Peter's friends had been. Hadn't Potter, Black, Lupin, and he been inseparable, at least not so long ago?

Reaching the main street again, Severus saw that it was empty on this end of the village. He could see students congregating farther down, walking or running away from where he was standing, no doubt making their way on the path to the school. Severus wasted no time in quickly going toward the crowd. Peter's body was fully covered, lest anyone see it.

As Severus walked past another alley, he heard someone whimpering and stopped. He wondered why no one had stopped to help whoever was in pain, but perhaps it was a trick? Severus gazed down the alley, wishing more than anything for a sunny day. The rain and darkness were making his vision limited, but he was able to spot the form of a boy about his age leaning against the side of a building, half-hidden next to some barrels.

Severus moved Peter's body to the side, keeping it in the shadow of the abandoned building as much as possible. Holding his wand aloft, he demanded, "Who's there?"

He heard a sharp intake of breath, and a rough voice replied, "Remus Lupin. Please, I am not a Death Eater. I've been attacked, and my friend Peter is missing."

Severus frowned. Lupin must not have recognized his voice. He stepped closer, seeing that it was indeed Lupin. The other boy was bleeding profusely from an injury on the side of his torso, buckling over in obvious pain. With a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach, knowing how Lupin must have sustained this injury, he knelt down in front of him.

"Lupin," Severus said harshly, as Lupin's attention was waning, "look at me."

Lupin's eyes went in and out of focus as he found Severus. "S-Severus?" he rasped.

Severus nodded. "You've been gravely injured, Lupin. We must get you to Madam Pomfrey, but first, I need to mend your injury."

Lupin grimaced as he barely nodded, and Severus uttered the songlike incantation to heal the wound. He kicked himself mentally for ever teaching his own curses to his old friends.

"Can you stand?" Severus asked gruffly, stepping back.

"I- I think so," Lupin replied, wincing as he made to stand.

"Let's go," Severus said. "Everyone else is mostly on their way back to the school by now."

Once they were back on the main street, Lupin's eyes were searching wildly for Peter. "Have you seen Peter?" he demanded, his voice weak.

Severus didn't know what to say, but he couldn't very well hold off telling the truth when Peter's covered body was feet away. He

nodded solemnly and gestured toward the dark mass off to the side of the street. Lupin gasped and held his free hand to his mouth, trying to refrain from vomiting. His other hand, which was at his side where the wound had been, grasped blindly at the front of his robe at his stomach, and he turned away from Severus, retching.

Severus levitated Peter's body again, hoping Lupin would hurry, but not blaming him for his reaction. When Lupin had emptied the contents of his stomach, he came to Severus's side as fast as he could carry himself. He reached for the cloth covering Peter's feet, where the body was drifting in the air just in front of them.

"Is he really-?" he croaked.

Severus glanced sideways at Lupin and saw that the other boy's eyes were shining with tears. In that moment, it didn't matter that they had ever been rivals.

"Yes," was all Severus managed.

They walked in silence, making their way to the other end of the village, which was now completely empty of students. All the shops were closed down and warded.

Finally, Severus forced himself to ask the burning question. "What happened? Who did this?"

"It was Mulciber... the older one who got expelled last year, and some other Death Eaters, although I couldn't see their faces," Lupin murmured, sounding weak and out of breath.

Severus paused in his tracks for a second, letting Lupin catch his breath, concerned the Gryffindor boy would fall over if he overexerted himself. They began their trek back to the school again, and Severus hoped Lily was all right. She was probably inside by now.

"Peter and I were alone," Lupin began again. "James was with Mary at The Three Broomsticks, and Sirius was in no mood to come today. He remained at Hogwarts. Anyway, Mulciber or someone with him... I couldn't remember who, went for me first, and then Mulciber, yes,

definitely him, he- he grabbed Peter and Disapparated with him. I didn't know where he'd gone..."

Lupin's voice cracked. Severus wouldn't ask him any more questions. His fears were confirmed. They were on school grounds now, drenched entirely through their clothing and shaking with chills from the dropping temperature. They continued the rest of the way in silence, finally making their way up the stairs to the main doors and going inside.

The moment they entered, Severus was nearly knocked over by Lily, who rushed at him vigorously and wrapped her arms around him.

"Oh, thank God!" she exclaimed, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Severus, don't you ever do that again!"

Severus returned the hug, but didn't say anything. When Lily noticed Lupin standing not too far away and the black mass floating in midair, she gasped.

"What-?"

"Pettigrew is dead, Lily," Severus said quietly, glancing from Lupin to her. "And Lupin was attacked. Lupin, you really ought to go to the infirmary. I can take Pettigrew's body to the headmaster."

Severus knew he sounded clinical, but he didn't mean to be insensitive. Someone had to keep a cool head in this situation, after all.

"No," Lupin protested. "I ought to talk to the headmaster, too. I was there when the assault started."

As he argued, though, Lupin felt his side begin to split open, and he fell to the floor. Severus shook his head, both angered and worried. He whispered the healing incantation again, and Lily watched him, her mouth hanging open, the nagging question left unasked.

"Lily, please usher him to the infirmary," Severus said firmly. "The headmaster will come see you when he's ready, Lupin."

Lily didn't contend. With a quick nod, she gently took Lupin's arm, and he complied, letting her lead him away. Severus watched them go, took a deep breath, and moved Peter's body across the Entrance Hall toward the headmaster's office. When he reached the door, Dumbledore was already standing there, as if expecting him.

"Severus," Dumbledore stated levelly, his eyes resting on Peter's body, "come in."

Severus was silent as he followed Dumbledore up to his office. Dumbledore took over levitating Peter's body and gingerly lowered him onto a couch once inside the headmaster's office.

"Severus, please sit," Dumbledore said, indicating the chair in front of his desk, the chair Severus had spent countless times in.

Severus slumped into the chair, his thoughts an absolute mess, wondering how a day could go from being so wonderful to so tragic. His dark eyes followed the ancient wizard as he removed the cloth from Peter's face and gazed momentarily upon him. With an age spotted hand, Dumbledore brought his fingers over Peter's eyes and closed them, and Severus looked away, feeling he was disturbing something private.

"Thank you for bringing Peter's body back to Hogwarts, Severus," Dumbledore said softly, covering Peter once again and coming to his desk, where he sat down opposite of Severus. He surveyed Severus over his half-moon spectacles for a minute, and then continued, "Miss Evans, that is, Lily... told me you had gone down the alley of the attack. That is how I knew to expect you. What you did was very brave and noble, Severus, and it has not escaped my attention what you have been doing this year - watching out for those less trained than yourself. I knew you had been training Peter Pettigrew these past couple of weeks."

Severus's head shot up at that last part. "How did you know, sir?" he couldn't help but ask.

"I am the headmaster, Severus," Dumbledore said mysteriously, smiling slightly, but his expression rapidly dissolved into a pensive one. "I must ask you - Was anyone else hurt that you know of?"

"Yes, sir... Remus Lupin was cursed with... with Sectumsempra," Severus muttered, ashamed and staring at his hands as they nervously fidgeted on his lap.

"Ah, the curse you invented," Dumbledore observed, although there was no accusation or malice in his tone.

"I healed him as best as I could. He's in the infirmary with Madam Pomfrey as we speak. He could tell you more about what happened, but he did tell me that Mulciber... Michael Mulciber was among the Death Eaters. Mulciber took Pettigrew, and I assume he also killed him."

Dumbledore nodded, taking everything in and considering it. "Very well, Severus. If you are all right, you are free to go. And I would like to award Slytherin fifty points for your actions today."

Normally, Severus would have felt proud to hear such praise from Dumbledore, as he had longed for him to acknowledge his sacrifices so many times in the past, but the events from less than an hour ago were still raw in his mind. Standing, Severus nodded weakly and felt his legs aimlessly leading him to the door.

After leaving the headmaster's office, Severus thought immediately of Lily and figured she might still be in the infirmary with Lupin. He felt drained to the point of numbness. Going toward the infirmary, Severus was relieved when he saw Lily walking toward him at one point.

"Sev," she said, smiling feebly.

Severus stopping walking and just stood there, his arms hanging loosely at his sides. Lily approached him, concerned, and took one of his hands in hers.

"Sev, wrong's wrong?" she enquired softly. She took her free hand and moved it to his cheek, gently stroking it. Some of his hair had fallen loose from the ponytail and now hung in his face, so Lily tenderly tucked the strand behind his ear. "Let's go to our place," she said, meaning their broom closet.

Severus let Lily guide him to their secret place, and once they were in private, Severus leaned back against the wall, staring at the ceiling. "I'm sorry I didn't have time to give you a ring," he muttered. "I had it all arranged with the store's owner, and I wanted you to be able to pick one out on your own. Then those damn Death Eaters had to-" Severus ground his teeth, knowing he wasn't saying what was really on his mind.

"Sev, don't be silly," Lily said affectionately. "I am so touched; you have no idea. What you had planned for today... It was the sweetest thing anyone's ever done for me. I already said yes, and I'm not going to change my mind simply because I haven't got a ring yet. Even if I never had a ring, that still wouldn't change the way I feel about you. When you risked going off on your own today, I was incredibly worried about you. To think if they would have done to you what they did to Peter..." she trailed off, her throat closing.

As they were sitting on the floor, Lily inched closer to Severus and embraced him. Tears spilled out of her closed eyes and onto the front of his robes as she buried her face in material there, and Severus stroked the back of her head, his fingers carding soothingly through her hair.

"I never meant to scare you, Lily; I'm sorry," Severus murmured, his voice rough with emotion. "I am concerned that my past sins have followed me, though. You know what they used on Lupin... my invention, Lily, mine. God, I was so *stupid* to share my spells with them!" Severus exclaimed, his voice growing louder and more upset with every word.

Lily withdrew her face from his robes and gazed upon his anguished face. "Sev, no... Don't blame yourself. You have been brilliant, brave, true, and kind. You helped Peter in his last days, not knowing they would be his last-"

"And look where it got him, Lily!" Severus cried. "Killed! Maybe it would have been better if I hadn't gotten involved. Mulciber's brother knew I was watching out for Pettigrew, and he must have gone and told Mulciber, my old *friend*, what I was up to."

"But there's no way they could have known you were training Peter," Lily pointed out carefully.

"It doesn't matter," Severus spat bitterly, hating himself for any number of reasons.

A passing thought went through his mind at that moment. What if Peter would have joined the Death Eaters knowing all that Severus had taught him? Severus felt like a fool and added this to his list of crimes.

"I'm not giving any more dueling sessions," Severus muttered. "I hate teaching, anyway."

He folded his arms defensively over his chest, and Lily could see that he was closing up and folding into himself, hiding behind walls he had long ago erected.

Lily tried to pry his arms apart, but they wouldn't budge. Instead, she took his face in her hands, looking him straight in the eyes. Unlike the cold tunnels her son had seen there in another life, all Lily could see was a lost, lonely, scared little boy, wanting nothing more than to be loved.

"Sev... Severus, look at me," she said.

Look... at... me...

Severus's last words to Harry came to the forefront of his mind as he heard those very words spoken to him. His eyes, very much alive, found Lily's. Nothing faded in the black this time, but his passion only grew.

"There's better," Lily commended. "Don't you *ever* doubt yourself. You just asked me to marry you, and I said yes. Sev, I love you for who you are, and when you asked me to spend the rest of my life with you, I could think of nothing I would rather do than walk through every part of life, both the good and the bad, together. Together, Sev. Not alone. You're not alone. I'm here with you, for you, always."

"Always," Severus echoed, the most sacred word to him. He blinked several times, watching at Lily's tears fell, mirrored on his face. His arms had unfolded as she had spoken, and now he enveloped her once again, his always and forever.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Word of who had been murdered that day in Hogsmeade quickly spread, and dinner time hadn't even arrived yet. In the Gryffindor common room, James and Sirius were struck with disbelief that one of their best friends was now dead. Mary sat by James's side at first, trying her best to console him, but he remained tight-lipped, not comfortable enough around her to open up. He shrugged off her attempts, eventually sending her away. Mary left, trying to understand, but feeling dejected and hurt.

"We should go see Moony," James said quietly.

Sirius nodded blankly.

The two boys left the commotion around them and headed toward the infirmary. As they walked, James wondered aloud, "Where d'you suppose Lily is?"

"Probably hiding away somewhere with Snivellus," Sirius said sullenly, glaring at the floor.

"Padfoot, mate," James said, a bit concerned. He stopped and rested a hand briefly on his friend's shoulder. "I know you're upset about Peter, and so am I, but why are you so angry? Snape-"

"He was friends... probably still *is* friends with those Death Eaters!" Sirius exclaimed. "He was spending an awful lot of time with Wormtail right before he suddenly wound up dead. You can't honestly stand there and tell me it isn't a coincidence."

"Padfoot, that's assuming a lot," James tried to point out. He was barely keeping his emotions in check, what with the tragedy that had just occurred, but James didn't feel like placing blame on anyone but the perpetrators.

Sirius didn't appear the least bit convinced. James sighed and motioned for him to follow. "C'mon, mate; let's get to Moony and see how he's holding up."

Sirius walked alongside James the rest of the way in silence. Once they arrived at the infirmary, they spotted Remus sitting up in one of the beds, looking physically fine, but his face was pinched as if he were sucking on a lemon and only brightened marginally upon seeing his friends.

"Prongs, Padfoot," Remus uttered softly, forcing a smile that looked more like a grimace.

"Are you okay, Moony?" James asked. "McGonagall told us you'd been attacked and were here."

"I'm fine," Remus muttered, glancing from James to Sirius. "I assume you heard?"

James nodded, and Sirius said with clenched teeth, "Yes, we heard, all right. What happened, exactly?"

Remus proceeded to explain the events to his mates just as he had told them to Severus a couple of hours ago.

"Wait a minute," Sirius interjected just as Remus described the curse used on him. "You were bleeding profusely from your side, like you'd been sliced open with a knife or something?"

Remus nodded. "Yes, why?"

Sirius's expression darkened, and he balled his fist, slamming it into his other palm aggressively. "Moony, that's the same curse Snape used on me," he ground out.

Remus's eyes were large with shock, but he didn't say anything. James knew what Sirius was thinking, and just as Sirius made to stand to storm out of the infirmary and no doubt find Severus, James grabbed him by the arm.

"No, Padfoot," he tried to say calmly.

"Let go of me, James," Sirius growled, much like his Animagus would.

James felt Sirius's entire body stiffen, and he tried to wrench his arm out of James's grasp.

"Now is not the time, mate," James stated firmly.

From the bed, Remus tried to reach for Sirius, but failed. His weakened voice pleaded, "Sirius, you know Snape had nothing to do with this. He was helping Peter. However that Death Eater found out that curse... You don't even know if it was the same one."

"I'll never forget it, Remus... what it felt like to be sliced open like a fish being gutted," Sirius said in a deadly whisper. "I assume because he healed me, only because he didn't want to get expelled probably, he is one of the few people who knows that curse."

"He healed me, too," Remus whispered, the realization hitting him that Sirius might be right.

"But that still doesn't prove anything," James pointed out, feeling Sirius slacken in his grip. He released his friend, and Sirius sank back onto the bed. "Snape *healed* both of you, and like Remus said, Sirius, Snape had been helping Peter. Remus, you were there during the training. I was there once, too. Did you ever see Snape do anything cruel, I mean abnormally out of line, to him?"

Remus shook his head. "No. He was a bastard to him sometimes, yelling at him and calling him names, but I think Snape's reasoning for doing that was to effectively train Peter... to scare him into actually fighting back."

Sirius gazed incredulously at his friends. "I can't believe what I'm hearing," he said, offended and betrayed. "You two are sitting here defending Snivellus. What's happened to you? Am I the only one who can see the truth for what it is? Our friend has just been *murdered*!"

"We know that, mate," James said in an uncharacteristically gentle voice. "You think we're not upset, too? That we won't miss our friend?"

"I wasn't saying that," Sirius said defensively, standing.

"Padfoot-" James tried to say.

"Sirius, please," Remus croaked, the emotion of the situation finally overwhelming him.

Sirius took a couple of paces away and turned to gaze upon his two remaining friends. His grey eyes were bright, as if he might cry, but he shook his head, and his expression immediately hardened. He walked away, and both James and Remus let him go.

"Maybe he just needs time to calm down," James said after Sirius was gone, although he didn't believe a word of what he was speaking.

"No, Prongs," Remus whispered. "I think Sirius has deeper problems than that, and what worries me is that he won't share them with us."

The Marauders were no longer who they used to be, any more than Severus was.

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After quite some time together in their sacred broom closet, Lily asked gently, "Are you going to be all right, Severus?"

Severus didn't answer immediately. He thought of how two people had now died who he had tried to help in this life, and regardless of whether Peter would have turned rotten or not, there was no telling. He had died today. Severus wondered how Peter had faced death. He hoped, at least, that he had been brave in his final moments. Unlike Eileen, Peter hadn't been a lost cause. Of course, Severus hadn't thought his mother too far gone before. He now wondered if he had been deluding himself by thinking he could change the outcome of events this time around, but then he thought of his father's improvement, and looking the short distance across the closet, he gazed right into the eyes that spoke the deepest truth he knew.

Lily was with him still. She wasn't leaving. Nothing but possibly death would ever change that, but if there was one thing Severus could hold on to, it was this amazing young woman in front of him.

"I'll be okay, Lily," Severus finally replied, just as she began to worry. He took her hands in his own and squeezed them.

Come what may, he could face it.

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After dinner that evening, Severus went into the Slytherin common room for the first time that day. He had gotten over the initial shock of Peter's death and now felt a rage growing inside, bubbling just below the surface. He knew if he saw Roger Mulciber and his gang, he would lose control of his temper. The little Death Eater wannabe was partly responsible for the attack today, and Severus felt something needed to be done.

As he surveyed the common room, Severus noticed most of the students were subdued. Even most of the Slytherins were shocked by today's events, and that was reassuring to Severus to know that more than half of his house didn't condone what had happened in Hogsmeade. When he saw Mulciber by the fireplace with his friends, though, the boy was laughing cruelly. Although Severus couldn't hear what the boys were whispering amongst themselves, he didn't care. His temper flaring, Severus strode quickly across the room and angrily jabbed his wand directly into Mulciber's chest. The other boys retreated, taken aback and even frightened by the menacing look on Severus's face.

"What are you-?" Mulciber started to ask.

"Shut up!" Severus yelled. He didn't notice everyone else staring at them. He didn't care.

Mulciber's eyes flashed fear for a split second, but then he mastered himself and glowered at Severus, daring him to continue.

"You told your brother about Pettigrew," Severus hissed.

"So what if I did?" Mulciber asked defiantly. "You came saving his arse, and I've seen you, Snape. You're sympathizing with Gryffindors and Mudbloods-"

Severus drove his wand farther into Mulciber's chest. "You *dare* utter such filth, you bastard. You think just because I'm not up for joining your brother and his friends that I am somehow above harming you? Let me assure you, Mulciber; I am not. You remember what I did to Sirius Black last year, I am sure? And that wasn't even intentional. The curse your disgraceful brother used on Lupin was *my* invention. He, Avery, and the whole lot of them never thought of anything original. So, I am warning you: Don't mess with me. Don't do anything stupid to another student, or else you'll find yourself worse off than expelled."

"Snape!" a gruff voice suddenly called.

Severus turned his head to see who was addressing him and saw Regulus Black standing not far away. "This doesn't concern you, Black. Go away," Severus growled.

"You're making a scene, Snape," Regulus said levelly. "Mulciber is a little shit, but the rest of us don't need to hear you say it."

Several of the students, Severus noticed, were holding their wands. Among them was Rose Clearwater, who normally avoided confrontation.

"Try anything, Mulciber, and you're toast," a boy in fifth year shouted.

Several others backed him up with threats, but other students, who were staying silent, stepped away, clearly uncomfortable with the situation. Behind Mulciber, about twenty others were standing, glaring back at Severus and the other students beyond him, and Severus could plainly see the division spread out before him in his house. Mulciber, although having been momentarily scared by Severus's words, felt emboldened by the support standing behind him.

"You're all talk, Snape," Mulciber said maliciously. "My brother and his friends have it right. You were a fool to have chosen the wrong side, the losing side."

Severus backed off, knowing it would do no good to rouse the entire Slytherin common room further. He now made it a top priority to inform Dumbledore of Roger Mulciber's past crimes and involvement

in the day's events. He hoped the headmaster would see reason and expel any student who supported the Dark Lord, but that was not going to be easy. Not all supporters were as open as Mulciber, and besides, Severus knew Dumbledore would be more likely to keep the students at the school if they were underage, arguing that they needed protection regardless of their viewpoints. Severus didn't feel the same way.

As Severus stepped away, he didn't let his guard down. He gazed at Regulus suspiciously, wondering if the boy he saw before him was a future Death Eater or not. His eyes traveled to Regulus's left arm, and he briefly entertained the idea of grabbing hold of that arm and pulling back his sleeve to see if the Dark Mark was branded there. Regulus sensed Severus was thinking something and looked at him quizzically, but didn't say anything. They met eyes for a moment, but then Severus turned and walked away, leaving the room.

Right now, Severus only felt the reassurance that, no matter what, Lily would be there for him.

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Peter's body was returned to his mother, and his funeral was held three days later. Severus didn't go to the funeral, even though Lily had wanted him to go with her. Severus assumed the Marauders had gone, and on that day, classes had been cancelled in observance of Peter's life. Students were somber as they reflected on how easily the life of one of their own could be taken.

Feeling lonely without Lily, Severus stepped outside onto the grounds to take a walk around the lake. He couldn't take having to see the sadness and fear on the faces of so many in the school, and he avoided those who supported Voldemort, knowing his anger was still fresh and could break through the carefully shrouded surface at any moment. He still needed to talk with the headmaster about Mulciber, but that could wait another day.

All future visits to Hogsmeade had been cancelled for the rest of the year, which didn't surprise Severus, but he wondered when he would get a chance to bring Lily back to the jewelry store to pick out a ring. With the aftermath of the attack in the wizarding village three days

ago, it was difficult for Severus to find the happiness in knowing that he was now engaged to Lily. He always imagined if he were engaged to her, he would feel nothing but excitement and joy, but those happy moods were fleeting.

As Severus looked up at the grey sky and bare trees, he found that the atmosphere outside reflected very well how he felt inside. Winter was fast approaching, and right now, the world appeared dead and empty. Severus sighed and sat on the cold, hard ground, leaning against a tree, wondering what was wrong with him that he couldn't even bring himself to smile about the good in his life right now.

Was it because, regardless of knowing he had Lily, he still had a void inside needing to be filled... with what? Hadn't he tried to be a better man? He believed - no, he knew - he had. He couldn't define his current state, and that bothered Severus immensely.

Just when he thought no one would dare disturb him, however, he was caught unaware as he felt a rough jab in his side. He turned, shocked, and saw Sirius Black standing there with his wand pointing into his ribs.

"We're going to talk, Snape," Black said lowly. "Just you and me this time."

Chapter Fifty-Nine

"We're going to talk, Snape," Black said lowly. "Just you and me this time."

Severus mustered a glare, although his heart wasn't in it. He had just been reflecting on the emptiness he felt inside, and so, he wasn't as quick in his response as he usually would have been.

"What do you want, Black?" Severus asked, trying to keep his voice impassive.

"The truth."

"Why aren't you with your friends?" Severus questioned suspiciously, trying to glance over Black's shoulder.

"They aren't coming," Black answered. "I didn't go to the funeral. I wasn't in the mood, you could say."

"I thought Pettigrew was your friend?" Severus sneered.

"Yes, Snivellus, he was my friend!" Black yelled, turning red in the face, visibly shaking.

Severus took the opportunity to attack. While he couldn't reach for his wand without Black knowing, he had other means of defending himself. With Black's guard down because of his emotional instability, Severus used Legilimency on him, gazing into Black's eyes as he glowered back at him. He hadn't resorted to invading anyone's mind at all so far in this lifetime. It wasn't something he took pleasure doing, but in Black's mind, he saw a range of unpleasant memories from his childhood, mostly of Black secluding himself in his room, hating his parents and brother. Severus felt the genuine rage inside the other boy, and Black, not knowing what was happening, backed away, turning his head, breaking the connection.

In one flourish, Severus stood and disarmed his opponent, holding his own wand aloft. Black recoiled, and then realizing what had just happened, made to charge at Severus. Severus supposed he could have Stunned Black, but he chose instead to let the Gryffindor boy

make a fool of himself. As Black came running at Severus, his fist ready to punch him squarely in the nose, Severus jumped out of the way and got enough footing to fly. He heard Black curse loudly and growl like a fierce dog.

"Get down here!" Black bellowed at Severus, both angered and surprised to see Severus flying. "How the hell are you doing that, anyway?!"

"I have no intention of being your punching bag, Black," Severus called down at him, "and until you're ready to actually 'talk,' as you put it, I'm not going to be stupid enough to lower myself to your level, both physically and mentally." He smirked, knowing his jab would irk the hell out of Black, but he didn't care.

If Black wanted to be a bully, Severus would let him take out his frustration on the air. Black chose instead to kick at the ground.

"Give me back my wand, you coward! The least you could do it fight fairly!"

At being called a coward, Severus lost any trace of his humor. "Don't you *dare* label me. You have no idea what you're even talking about. As for fighting fairly, I would hardly call what you and your mates did to me for years fair. Since when did four-on-one seem fair, Black? Then again, perhaps it does in your limited capacity to reason."

Black ran toward Severus, who had flown a little closer to the ground, as if taunting the other boy to come at him.

"Anything's fair when it's Death Eater filth I'm fighting!" Black shouted, truly irate.

Severus thought Black was verging on insanity. He had always wondered if Black had been mentally imbalanced, and that was a frightening thought. He didn't think playing with him would suffice any longer.

"I happen to agree with you on that point," Severus remarked, "especially seeing as I am not a Death Eater, nor do I ever have any desire to be one! I know what you think of me. You thought it would

be amusing to see my life ended because you apparently thought it would be one less future Death Eater?"

Severus posed the question harshly, knowing full well that Black hadn't tried to have him killed because it would eliminate a future Death Eater.

"No, I don't suppose that was the reason, after all!" Severus yelled viciously. "You thought it would be entertaining and amusing! You hated me from that day on the train in first year!"

"So what if I hated you?!" Black screamed. "You are a Slytherin! You and the whole lot of them are just like my family, supporters of Voldemort and lovers of Dark Magic! It's because of your kind that the wizarding world is at war! You are responsible for Peter's death; I know you are! And Remus was attacked with your invention! Do you deny it?!"

Spit was flying out of Black's mouth. He looked truly deranged, and Severus was glad he had disarmed him and that he was safely in the air.

Some of Black's accusations were true, but most were not. "You cannot group a whole mass of people together, Black," Severus stated, trying to rule his outrage. "And I did nothing to harm Peter. I was trying to *help* him!" he shouted, rapidly losing control of himself. "Your friends can attest to that. As for what the Death Eaters used on Lupin, yes... I don't deny that it was my invention. I swear I never even thought it would be used like that... by those people! I was stupid to have taught them, all right?!"

As he openly admitted his shortcoming to his enemy, Severus felt himself cracking, and he hated every moment he had to endure in Black's company. "I did not mean for this to happen," Severus said softly, looking away from Black. "I am sorry for any part I had in it, but it was never my intention for your friend to die."

For his part, Sirius didn't want to believe a word Severus was speaking. He had told himself repeatedly for so long, even after Remus and James had tried to convince him otherwise, that Severus was still the enemy. Upset by Peter's death, Sirius hadn't yet properly

mourned. He had avoided going to the funeral because he didn't want to acknowledge the truth. He had refused point-blank to rationally listen to what James and Remus had told him on the day Peter had been murdered. Instead, he had focused all his energy and devastation on blaming Severus, on hatred, and on irrational anger.

Sirius had been shaking with rage more than anything since attacking Severus, but now he was trembling, feeling weak as he felt his legs giving out underneath. Sirius finally allowed the tears to fall. He refused to look at Severus, flying in the air above him, seeming to judge him from above. He hoped the Slytherin boy had enough decency to look away, and from his vantage point, Severus did just so. He slowly lowered himself to the ground, still several feet away from Sirius. He kept his gaze on the lake and the sky, but Severus could hear Sirius's embittered sobs.

Severus wondered if hell had just frozen over. He never imagined apologizing to Sirius for anything, but as he listened to the other boy's grief for the loss of a friend, he couldn't hate him for his illogical reaction because of that loss.

Finally, Sirius stopped crying. He turned to Severus. "Can I have my wand back now?" he asked.

Severus nodded and tossed it back. He didn't expect Sirius would attack him. He knew what it was to be in Sirius's position of grief. Sirius caught the wand and pocketed it.

"I'm sorry, too," Sirius whispered. "I mean... for thinking you were responsible for Peter's death."

Severus didn't expect Sirius to apologize for being a git to him for so many years, but this was better than nothing. There was too much of a history of animosity between the two of them for easy forgiveness.

Severus nodded carefully. "Then let's go back inside. Won't your friends be back soon and looking for you?"

"Probably," Sirius said quietly. He avoided Severus's gaze.

Severus kept at a safe distance from Sirius, looking anywhere but at him. He was freezing from being outside for so long and wished for a warm fire. Once they reached the castle, Sirius went in first, letting the door close behind him. Severus snorted to himself, trying to imagine Sirius holding the door for him and knew that would never happen. Severus would just as soon let it slam in Sirius's face. Entering the castle a moment later, Severus caught a quick glimpse of Sirius as he rounded the corner.

Still unable to quite grasp the words exchanged mere minutes ago between them, Severus decided to go to his room and wait for Lily's return. He wasn't bothered by anyone on the walk there, and thankful to have reached his destination, Severus entered his room and locked the door behind him. He lit a fire in the grate and sat down in the single chair provided, staring into the flames.

He considered all that had happened between the Marauders and him since returning to his new life. If someone would have told him before in his other life that he would one day be on civil terms with the Marauders, he would have snorted in disbelief if he were in a relatively good mood, and he probably would have hexed them if here were one of his normally bad moods. Dumbledore had always wanted Severus and Sirius to get along better before. He had even made them shake hands, much to their mutual dislike. Severus still didn't like Sirius Black, but he hoped this conversation would have a lasting impact on Sirius. Severus had no intentions of being the one to start any sort of rivalry between Sirius or his friends.

Thinking of Dumbledore brought to mind the fact that he really needed to talk with the headmaster about Roger Mulciber and his lackeys. Things had gotten too far out of hand, especially since no real intervention had been made, and Peter had wound up dead as a result of it. Right now, the headmaster was at the funeral, so their conversation would have to wait until at least that evening.

Severus longed for Lily's companionship right now. He found his once-sought welcoming solitude didn't bring the comfort it used to. Severus sighed in the chair. He supposed he could study, but the emptiness he had been feeling before Sirius had assaulted him was returning. Severus now grew annoyed.

"What the hell is the matter with me?" he muttered to himself. He stood and paced, suddenly restless.

Minutes ago, he had wanted a fire to relax by, but now he wasn't satisfied. Severus wondered if he shouldn't just put the damn thing out and leave his room. There were countless corridors to walk, after all.

But no, he was here, alone now. He didn't want to see anyone or for anyone to see him, and he would definitely come across others in the halls in the middle of the afternoon. Resigning himself to the choice of staying in his room, Severus went to his desk and grabbed a book, returned to the chair, and forced himself to read. The words could have been in a foreign language for all the good they did to distract Severus's overactive mind, though.

A couple of hours later, Severus started awake. He blinked several times, noticing it was dark outside. The fire had mostly gone out, leaving a few dimly glowing embers in its wake. For a second, Severus thought it was the middle of the night, but when he lit a couple of lamps and saw the time, he was relieved he hadn't missed dinner.

Lily would be back by this time, so feeling a bit better, Severus stood and left the confines of his room, intent on eating quickly and going off somewhere with Lily.

Upon reaching the Great Hall, Severus saw it was full of students. Dumbledore was at the staff table, and Severus noticed Lily sitting next to Mary Macdonald, and a little farther down the table were Sirius, James, and Remus. Severus caught Lily's attention as he walked down the aisle between the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tables.

"Hey, Sev," she greeted him when he was upon her.

"Hi, Lily," Severus returned. "Our usual place after dinner?"

Mary pretended not to hear, but Severus noticed the other girl smile when he said "our usual place."

"Definitely," Lily replied.

With that, Severus went to the Slytherin table and sat on the end. He was accustomed to sitting alone and was surprised when a couple of girls from his house got up from where they had been sitting and slid closer to him.

One of them, Rose Clearwater, said, "Hello, Severus." She smiled delightedly at him.

"Miss Clearwater," Severus said, watching her and her friend skeptically.

"Don't you think it's okay... to call me Rose?" she asked quietly, blushing.

Severus had never spoken more than three words directly to Rose. She had always been so shy, and for her to be trying to initiate conversation with him was unusual.

"All right... Rose," Severus said awkwardly. He searched his mind for the name of Rose's friend. "And you are... Emily Porter, correct?" he asked the other girl.

Emily, another fourth year like Rose, had dark hair that clashed with Rose's blonde. Severus was vaguely reminded of the Black sisters, Bellatrix and Narcissa, but didn't suppose these girls were anything like them.

"Yes," Emily said, sounding more sure of herself than Rose.

"Very well," Severus replied, feeling the awkwardness growing. "Did you want something?"

"Just to tell you that we admire what you're doing for Slytherin," Emily asserted. "The other houses," she said, lowering her voice and leaning in, "don't like us much. You've no idea what you've done for the morale of our house, Severus." She smiled at him.

Severus's mouth twitched, but he didn't quite smile. "That is kind of you to say so," he stated, forcing himself to be formal.

He appreciated their words and the deeper sentiment behind them, but the odd feeling of being flattered made Severus uneasy. He hoped the girls weren't trying to flirt with him, because that alone would give him cause to feel guilty... not that he would reciprocate. Glancing at Lily, Severus hoped the two girls would leave him alone.

"Well... that's all," Rose finally uttered, casting a glance at her friend, who giggled like a Hufflepuff.

Oh, honestly, Severus thought, don't insult the great name of Slytherin house by sounding like a tickled-pink Hufflepuff crushing after some poor bloke.

Severus felt relief flood him when the girls retreated, leaving him to eat his dinner undisturbed. Once he had finished, he noticed that Lily was no longer in the Great Hall. He glared half-heartedly at Rose and Emily as he strode past them, blaming them for keeping him longer than he intended.

Finding Lily in their usual spot, the infamous broom closet, Severus sat next to her.

"How was the funeral?" Severus inquired softly. As soon as he spoke the words, he thought he sounded ridiculous. "I mean, you know-" he tried to clarify.

"It was a nice service," Lily said, taking his hand in hers. "You should have been there, Sev. I think you would have liked it... despite it being a funeral and all."

Severus realized there was no great way to discuss a funeral. "I wasn't the only one who didn't go," he muttered, thinking of his earlier encounter with Sirius.

"I know," Lily replied. "I think Sirius regrets not going now. I overheard him talking with James and Remus when we'd all just gotten back. He really seemed broken up."

"And did you hear anything he said?" Severus asked, curious.

"No, why?"

"He... Black and I had a talk today, although I think Black's original intent was more to throttle me. Attack first, ask questions later kind of thing."

Lily's mouth dropped open. "What happened?" she questioned, worried.

Severus explained the interaction with Sirius, ending with, "So, we sort of made amends, at least for Peter's death. I'm certainly not forgiving him for his treatment of me the past seven years."

"That was really decent of you, Sev," Lily said. "Last year, I would have said I was impressed, but I know now that you have it in you, so I'm not surprised. You were the bigger man."

"Do you really believe that?" Severus wondered.

"Sure, I do. It wasn't easy for you to apologize, even though you really didn't have to. You did the right thing, though, not knowing if he would be decent in return and apologize, but he did, Sev. Maybe Sirius will come round like James has and see more of what I see in you."

Severus laughed uncomfortably. "I don't want them seeing in me what you do, Lily. You're in love with me, aren't you?"

"Look at you making a joke, Sev," Lily teased, kissing him on the nose, then on the lips briefly. "You really can laugh at yourself now because you're not worried anyone else is laughing at you."

Lily's melodic laughter rose in the air, filling that emptiness inside Severus. He couldn't pin why that was the case, but through the tragedy of the last few days, Severus had come out the stronger, the better, the enduring happier for them.

Chapter Sixty

While Lily was with Severus, the Marauders were back in the Gryffindor common room after dinner. The mood was somber between the three friends, but Sirius's mood had improved.

"You really should've come today, Padfoot," James was saying for the third time that day.

"I know; I know," Sirius said, annoyed. "How many times are you gonna pound it into my head, Prongs?"

"Sorry," James replied, half-smiling. The smile faded, and he said, "But I'm glad to see you're better than you were this morning and the past couple of days. We were worried about you, mate."

"You could've talk to us more, Sirius," Remus stated seriously.

Sirius nodded. "I was acting like a git, I know, but you guys don't understand what it's like in my family. I guess that's really painted my view of Slytherins in a bad way... not that I think they're suddenly trustworthy. I still don't like Snape, but what I heard today from him wasn't what I expected."

"Snape's not so bad," Remus pointed out, "as I tried to tell you, but you didn't want to hear it. Anyway, enough about Snape. What do we do now? I mean, without Wormtail?"

James and Sirius didn't know how to answer that question.

"What d'you mean, Moony?" James asked.

"I don't even really know," Remus murmured. "It's just so... weird without him around. I guess it hasn't been long enough to really sink in, you know?"

James and Sirius both nodded sadly.

"I think it's important that the three of us promise to be friends for life," Sirius suddenly stated.

James and Remus were stunned by how grave that statement was. Sirius usually spent so much time joking around, or lately, being bitter, that hearing a serious and compassionate statement from him was shocking. After losing one of their own, though, they could understand his assertion.

"Of course, mate," James agreed in earnest. "You know I wouldn't have it any other way." He smiled and clapped his friend on the back.

Remus gave a firm nod and squeezed Sirius's arm briefly.

"I'm sorry I almost lost you two," Sirius said softly. "Maybe not to death, but still... the way I was acting, I would've driven you away."

"Not that easily," Remus joked.

"Yeah, we wouldn't've made that pretty difficult," James teased.

Sirius laughed for the first time in days.

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After spending some time with Lily that evening, Severus figured it best he finally talk with the headmaster. Putting the inevitable conversation off another day wouldn't help the headaches Severus kept getting over thinking about Roger Mulciber and his friends, and worse, it certainly wouldn't help the problems growing more serious by the day in Slytherin.

Severus uttered the password to the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the headmaster's office, glad he was Head Boy and knew said password. He stepped onto the revolving staircase and allowed it to lead him to the top, where the door to Dumbledore's office waited for him to knock on it. Severus took a deep breath and readied himself for what he knew wasn't going to be an easy or pleasant conversation. He rapped on the door.

The echoes reverberated off the walls in the small space in which Severus was confined. From inside his office, Dumbledore heard the knock loud and clear. Curious as to who might be requesting an audience with him at the ever-growing late hour, Dumbledore

beckoned the door open with a mere wave of the hand. When he saw Severus standing there, a smile broke onto the aged face.

"Why, good evening, Severus," Dumbledore greeted him amiably. "Do come in, my boy. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

As Severus stepped into the room, he scowled at Dumbledore's nauseatingly overboard salutation. Of course, Severus was used to Dumbledore's theatrics, mostly from his other life as a professor, but he had a feeling this wouldn't be the last time he would have to bear witness to Dumbledore's merriment and twinkling in this lifetime.

"I wouldn't exactly call it a pleasure," Severus muttered, sitting in his usual spot. "What I wish to discuss with you isn't anywhere near pleasurable."

"Ah," Dumbledore said, finally restraining himself some. The old wizard took the seat behind the desk. "Can I get you something to drink? Tea, perhaps? Do you care for a sherbert lemon, Severus?"

Severus glared at the jar of sweets on the headmaster's desk as Dumbledore pointed toward them. "No, thank you," Severus said with apparent distaste, more because Dumbledore seemed overzealous to see him. Suspicion arousing inside him, Severus asked, "Did you expect my visit, sir?"

"How might I know you would come tonight, Severus?" Dumbledore posed, trying to sound innocent, but Severus wasn't buying it for a minute. Sobering, Dumbledore continued, "However, due to recent events, let's just say I am not surprised you decided to come talk with me. You haven't exactly been vocal with me as of late, but I knew the time would ripen when you would wish to talk with me. First I must ask, however, why didn't you attend the funeral today?"

"Why would I?" Severus countered.

"Considering all that has happened, I thought it might have brought you some closure, some sort of solace, Severus," Dumbledore explained. "It was a nice remembrance of Peter's life. You helped him in his final days. Having spent time with him, I assumed you had gotten to know him better. You did bring him back to Hogwarts... I

simply thought you would have attended after doing so much for the poor boy."

"I don't like funerals," Severus mumbled. "Besides... he wasn't my friend."

"He could have been given more time, I believe."

Severus shrugged, not caring to discuss Peter. Peter was gone. He wished to talk about the circumstances and people responsible for Peter's death. When Severus didn't say anything more, Dumbledore sighed and asked, "Well, go on, Severus. What is it you wanted to talk with me about?"

"When I told you three days ago that Mulciber, the one who had been expelled last year, was responsible for Peter Pettigrew's death and for attacking Remus Lupin, I neglected to inform you that I believe Roger Mulciber is also responsible for part of what happened," Severus explained.

"And what makes you believe this, Severus?" Dumbledore asked curiously.

Severus wondered how Dumbledore could talk about such a grave matter as if they were merely discussing the weather. Irritated, Severus leaned forward in his chair and spread his arms apart. "This is not something to be taken lightly, sir," he stated.

"I am quite aware of that," Dumbledore replied, only sounding slightly more serious.

Losing his temper, Severus hit the arm of the chair and stood. "Damn it, Dumbledore! Why don't you just give me some straight answers to my questions? When I asked how you knew I had been training Peter, you gave me some elusive nonsense about simply knowing because you are the headmaster. I demand you listen to my concerns!"

Dumbledore gave Severus a moment to finish his tirade. "I trust you have gotten that off your chest now?" Dumbledore inquired, now gazing at Severus sternly.

Severus groaned and slunk back into his chair. "Roger Mulciber may only be a third year," Severus continued, trying to remain calm, "but he is still a threat. I caught him threatening Peter once in the owlery, but I know he did it on more than one occasion. I believe Roger Mulciber has been in contact with Michael Mulciber, hence making Peter a target."

Dumbledore was stroking his beard thoughtfully. "And what would you have me do, Severus? I can give him detentions, but I can't warrant expelling him. He hasn't done anything as serious as what Michael Mulciber did to you last year in Hogsmeade."

"But he's an accomplice!" Severus shouted, his anger flaring again. "He's basically taken on the role his big brother had when he was here. He's the ring leader of a whole group of You-Know-Who's supporters. You can't let people like him stay at Hogwarts!"

"People like him?" Dumbledore inquired softly. "Severus, correct me if I am mistaken, but weren't you once following the same path not so long ago? Should I have thrown you out of the school just because of what you believed... or worse, what I *thought* you believed? If I had done so, chances are you would have been much worse off. You have proven that not everyone will stay on the same path. You *chose* to do what was right, and you continue to do so. Why do you think I made you Head Boy this year?" Dumbledore paused, then continued, "Because you are just the example Slytherin house so desperately needs."

Severus felt his blood boiling. He felt used by Dumbledore all over again. He felt like the headmaster's little pawn on the chess board, placed just so to do the master's bidding.

"A good example?" Severus sneered. "A role model?" He snorted, then sobered. "I am not going to be your plaything, your- your puppet, Dumbledore."

Dumbledore's eyes were no longer twinkling. Instead, they had taken on a piercing, hard edge. Severus could feel the old man trying to probe his mind, but he immediately erected his mental barriers and turned his head.

"Severus," Dumbledore stated firmly, "I am most curious to know how you have become so adept at Occlumency... and not just that... but at dueling, at knowing how to fly... something even I have never mastered. You are seventeen years old. I am already aware of your rare talent to invent curses and cures. Your skill at Potions and Defense rivals even that of grown wizards. You are a powerful wizard, Severus. Why wouldn't I want to have you on my side? There is a war on the horizon, and you have made a very powerful stance. Your statement is clear. You oppose everything Voldemort stands for, and for that, you are much more than some puppet or pawn, even though you would accuse me of placing you in that position."

Severus knew Dumbledore would continue in a moment. Resuming, Dumbledore said, "You have made your own choices all along, Severus. Believe what you want of me, but as I told you, you are a breath of fresh air to your house. They admire you."

"You are purposefully evading my original question, sir," Severus said stoically, not biting into the praise Dumbledore was trying to feed him. "What are you going to do about Roger Mulciber and his friends?"

"You have been doing a fine job of keeping them in line," Dumbledore replied wearily. "You may continue to inform me and the other professors, as necessary, if you feel further action must be taken, but until he does something like attack another student with the Cruciatus curse, I cannot do much but place him in detention, which I will have done, and remove house points."

"That's rubbish!" Severus exclaimed, incensed. "I haven't been able to 'keep them in line,' as you say! If I had, do you think Peter Pettigrew would be dead now? You're the bloody headmaster! If I were headmaster, I wouldn't stand for this kind of thing! I would expel any student who supports You-Know-Who!"

Severus thought of his year as headmaster, of how dark and horrible those times had been, of how he had wished beyond anything to be able to do what he truly wanted... to show that he had hated Voldemort and hadn't wanted to kill Dumbledore. He had loathed every moment he had spent imprisoned in this very office that year. Death, in a way, had been a sweet release.

"But you are *not* the headmaster, young man!" Dumbledore suddenly thundered, standing behind the desk.

Taken aback by this display of power and frightened, realizing anew why Dumbledore was feared, Severus recoiled in his chair, feeling like a little kid.

"I don't know what has gotten in your mind, which you don't want the rest of the world to see, that makes you think you have the right to tell me how to run my school, but you will be corrected, Severus," Dumbledore stated, sitting down. His voice was cold, detached.

Severus regained his composure and gazed back at the commanding wizard across from him. He had rarely seen Dumbledore's fury, especially directed at him, but never before had he challenged the headmaster like this. Realization struck Severus as to why Dumbledore had reacted the way he had. Dumbledore felt threatened by Severus. Severus, being a skillful, powerful, and intelligent in his own right at a young age scared the old man across from him.

Suddenly, Severus knew he had an advantage over Dumbledore, and he inwardly smiled in triumph. He hated feeling the constant loser in life... first with his father, then the Marauders, then Voldemort, then Dumbledore... always having to serve someone else's wishes, those who wanted to use him for their own means. The difference with Lily was that Severus loved her, and because of that, he was willing to surrender everything for her. He would serve out of love, but not out of fear.

Severus quietly watched Dumbledore for any small hint he was fearful of him. He did not love his man in front of him, and Severus knew he had first served him because of his true loyalty to Lily. In this life, Severus decided he was going to be his own master.

"Very well," Severus said curtly, not wishing to argue further. He didn't need to have the last word. He was satisfied inside.

Severus stood and left the headmaster's office. Although still aggravated at Dumbledore's insolence for not listening to him, Severus's newfound feeling of having an advantage that Dumbledore didn't possess made up for it. He returned to his room, intent on

getting a good night's sleep. After the past three days, he would need it to face whatever was coming.

Chapter Sixty-One

After Severus left the headmaster's office that evening, Dumbledore sat for a while in his chair behind the desk, reflecting on the conversation they had just had. Severus had hurled accusatory words at Dumbledore, which confounded the old man. There had only ever been one other student who Dumbledore had taken such an interest in, had seen such power in at a young age, and had found reason to be apprehensive over, and that had been the young Tom Riddle, who was now trying to rule the world as Lord Voldemort.

Dumbledore thought back on Severus's years at Hogwarts, comparing them to Tom Riddle's. From the first time Dumbledore had met Tom Riddle, the boy had wanted to prove himself and had been cruel and yet knowing when to turn on the charm. Severus, while having possessed a gleam in his youthful eyes of wanting to be somebody important, had been a very different child. While Tom Riddle had had a circle of "friends" who he dominated, Severus had been mostly a loner. Even when Severus had fallen into the wrong crowd, he hadn't been their leader. Severus had been the boy who had been almost constantly ridiculed, while Tom Riddle had done the bullying.

Of course, Dumbledore himself had chosen to stand back and not intervene much on Severus's behalf. It wasn't until he had seen a dramatic shift in Severus's decision to separate himself from his old friends and thus embolden his friendship with Lily Evans that Dumbledore had taken an interest in him. Last year, he thought he had seen the beginning of a strong ally, one who opposed everything Voldemort stood for, what with having escaped from the Dark Lord's clutches.

Now, Dumbledore was growing tired of Severus's blatant refusal to make a firm declaration to join him. Dumbledore wanted to know why Severus was suspicious, and any time he had tried to access the young man's mind, Severus had severely blocked him.

The Occlumency, the flying, the dueling... all of those were skills Severus had at age seventeen that even Dumbledore himself couldn't

boast having honed so well by that age. Was Dumbledore jealous? Intimidated?

Dumbledore sighed, a storm beginning to brew inside. The hour was late, and his aged body needed its sleep. As Dumbledore left his office and went to his chamber, he was determined to find out just what made Severus tick.

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The next couple of weeks that followed Peter's untimely death were oddly devoid of much action. Every day when Severus would survey the Slytherin common room for trouble, Mulciber and his friends were either absent or sat sulking in the corner. Severus knew Dumbledore had given them two weeks' worth of detention, but he wasn't convinced by a long shot that it would have any lasting effect on their behavior. Glares would be exchanged between Severus and the unruly boys, but no words were spoken. Severus waited for the day when his temper would be tested again. He didn't think he would be able to refrain from doing real damage next time.

Severus continued to avoid the headmaster. Whenever he was in Dumbledore's vicinity, the old wizard would give him a searching look, and Severus would instantly avert his eyes. The more he seemed to try to distance himself from the headmaster's scrutiny, the more Dumbledore appeared to pursue him.

Severus continued to while away through each day, finding the emptiness inside him growing. Having Lily wasn't enough anymore. Of that he was certain. If someone would have asked him upon first returning to life what would have given him true happiness, he would have said having Lily back and having his love returned. Now, however, Severus felt his purpose was more than just fulfilling his once unrequited love.

The answer to his wondering about his purpose came soon thereafter, or at least the beginning of it. The reality of taking a firm stance and being more proactive in the war was brought to light one day in late November when Severus was performing his nightly duty of ensuring peace, albeit forced, in the common room.

Rose and Emily were sitting amongst a fairly large group of students opposite the side of the room Mulciber usually occupied. Emily, being the more assertive of the two, approached Severus and greeted him. Severus cast a sparing glance in the other direction, seeing that Mulciber and his crones weren't there.

"Good evening, er, Emily," Severus replied a bit awkwardly. He still wasn't accustomed to speaking with others who he had barely interacted with previously.

"Do you have a minute?" Emily asked, gazing into Severus's eyes. She blushed some and took a step back.

Severus frowned, even more uncomfortable that a girl might be flirting with him. Unsure of her motives, he replied, "I suppose that would require asking why you need a minute of my time."

"Not just me," Emily clarified, looking back at the group of students behind her. "We all wanted to talk with you."

Severus looked past Emily's head and saw roughly fifteen students gathered there, most of them younger than fifth year. He sighed. "All right."

Emily smiled too excitedly for Severus's tastes, but he followed her toward the others and stood there stiffly, wondering what they could possibly want. These were the students who had been among those who had backed him up a few weeks ago when Mulciber had threatened him in the common room. Severus knew he had nothing to fear as far as them trying to do him harm, but he found he was more compromised being looked upon with admiration.

"We know you were helping train Pettigrew before he was killed," a boy in the back asserted.

"And you were helping more than just him, right?" another mousy-haired boy questioned.

Severus clenched his teeth. He should have known it would get out sooner or later about his sessions with Peter, Remus, and Lily... and James the one time. James and Sirius were not known for being

discreet and had probably felt it completely within their rights to inform the school of what had occurred. Still not over the incident in Hogsmeade from nearly a month ago, Severus hadn't bothered to start those sessions again. As he had told Lily, he didn't wish to, but now a whole group of students was inquiring after him about those damned lessons.

"Yes, I was helping him," Severus confirmed in clipped tones, booking no room for argument as he continued, "but I am not planning on carrying on with those sessions."

"Why not?" Rose asked, sounding put out.

"You weren't planning on it, but that doesn't mean you can't continue," a fifth year boy pointed out.

"Absolutely not," Severus stated firmly. "I have no reason to pretend to be one of your professors and teach you defensive techniques. Do you not attend Defense classes for that very training?"

"But maybe it's not enough," Emily cut in. "We're not the only ones who think so, Severus. You can't honestly tell me you haven't heard the mumblings going on in all the houses about you? You- you're a hero in so many people's eyes. We know you not only defied You-Know-Who last year, but you brought back Peter Pettigrew's body."

Severus shook his head, not able to believe what he was hearing. Deep inside, he had always wanted to be important and to be admired because of who he was, but he had long ago pushed those childish dreams into the most hidden recesses of his mind. The conversation he had had with Dumbledore came to mind, and Severus was reminded anew of his stance against being Dumbledore's puppet. To fight for what was right didn't mean he needed to do so according to the old wizard's precepts. Severus balked at the possibility of what lay before him. Dare he take the initiative to train young wizards and witches according to what he felt was the best strategy? After Hogwarts, he would be free to carry forth as he found necessary, and while he would be viewed by most as a loose ally to Dumbledore, Dumbledore himself would see him as a threat. Severus knew this. Dumbledore hated competition.

If only to piss the old man off, but really, Severus knew his reason for affirming his future actions ran much deeper, Severus nodded. "Fine, yes, I will look into it."

Emily and Rose beamed, and a small cheer went up in the group. Severus inclined his head and left the common room, eager to be away from the attention. As he returned to his room with renewed vigor, Severus didn't feel quite so empty. While the niggling void still persisted within, Severus believed in himself, just as Lily had always told him to do.

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"You're really serious about this?" asked Lily when Severus told her the following day about starting the duelling sessions back up.

"Yes," Severus said, "although I hope it isn't against my better judgment."

They were in the library, trying to keep their voices down, lest Madam Pince become incensed and throw them out.

"I think it's a great idea," Lily declared. "I had hoped you would start the sessions again after Peter's death. Those students must have said something to change your mind."

Severus shrugged, not wishing to dwell too much on the topic. He was willing to give the session another try, and while he felt a renewed purpose in doing so, he wasn't going to jump to any conclusions.

"When were you thinking of having the next one?" Lily posed curiously.

"Perhaps next week," Severus replied. "I suppose there are more students than just those in my house who are interested."

"I'm sure Remus and James would want to return... and possibly Black," Lily stated. Noticing Severus's scowl at the mention of Sirius Black, she amended, "If that's okay with you."

"Fine," Severus ground out. "But if Black so much as tries even the slightest thing, he's out."

"Who would have thought, Gryffindors and Slytherins working together," Lily mused. "I'm sure there are plenty of students in my house who would come if they were invited, not to mention Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws."

Severus raised an eyebrow at what Lily was proposing. "And I suppose you will be helping to lead this operation?" he inquired dryly.

Smiling, Lily said, "Of course, Sev. Do you think I'd expect you to exert control over masses of students?"

"I don't know anything about masses," Severus replied skeptically, "but next week, say Monday at seven, we shall meet in that old classroom we had been using. I'm not promising anything permanent, though."

"All right, Sev," Lily conceded, still smiling, knowing Severus wasn't going to let this go easily this time around.

And she was right. While Severus wouldn't admit it out loud, he hoped for success this time. Anything he could do to help ensure a better future for the wizarding world was worth it.

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When Monday evening came, Severus arrived at the empty classroom fifteen minutes in advance, not wanting to be late. He was the first one there, and a couple of minutes later, Lily entered, followed immediately by the Marauders. Severus wished he could have been alone with Lily to go over last minute details, but with James, Sirius, and Remus present, he stiffened and kept his eyes on the door, relieved when Rose and Emily came in. Lily stood next to him, taking his hand and giving it a reassuring squeeze.

"Everything will be fine, Sev, more than fine," she whispered to him.

Nodding blankly, Severus watched as many more of the Slytherins who had inquired after the duelling sessions last week entered, and

then came a few Gryffindors, including Mary Macdonald, who went over to James. The giggly Hufflepuff girls were next, and Severus wondered if they hadn't simply come because they knew he would be teaching them. More Hufflepuffs, a couple of Gryffindors, and a few Ravenclaws made their way in, and once it was seven o'clock, Severus locked and warded the door.

"It's time to begin," he announced. "Anyone who is late won't be able to get in and should learn that we will always start promptly at the scheduled time. The door is warded so we aren't interrupted, and," he waved his wand, placing further wards on the room, "any sound we make won't leave this room."

Severus took a moment to survey the gathered crowd before him. There were about forty students total, and Severus began to wonder what he had gotten himself into. He glanced at Lily uneasily, losing his resolve to speak.

Lily smiled and resumed the greeting. "Welcome, everyone. I hope you all know why you're here - to learn how to properly duel. If you are here for other reasons, please leave now. These sessions aren't going to be a walk in the park. There's war going on out there," she motioned toward the exterior wall of the castle, "and we need to be prepared."

When she stopped speaking, Severus expected a mass exodus. No one left, however. Steely-eyed gazes met his eyes, and Severus swallowed down the nervous lump in his throat. He wasn't going to be shy. He had been a teacher for years, after all, and hadn't let students ever intimidate him. He had instilled fear in them as a way of exerting control over them, of feeling more powerful and important. Now, Severus realized part of the reason he felt so uncomfortable in this moment was because he was going to be teaching them as their equal, as another student. While he had experiences and skills they didn't, to them he was just another student. More than that, Severus wasn't used to admiration, even in the smallest quantity, and the unease he felt in its presence made him feel just the opposite of important. While admiration was meant to make a person feel important, a modest person wouldn't let it go to his head. Of greatest importance, however, was the fact that Severus was not the same

bitter man he once had been. That, he supposed, made nearly all the difference.

"All right, then," said Severus, finding his voice, "let's begin. Everyone needs to partner up, preferably with someone who isn't a friend of yours, and stand opposite of them in the room."

A few of the students muttered their protests, but they paired up, some even choosing to intermingle with other houses. Severus noticed that none of the Slytherins and Gryffindors were matched up, which didn't surprise him. Unfortunately, James and Sirius didn't seem to think it necessary to listen to Severus, for they were standing across from each other.

Severus sighed and approached them. "That means you two as well, Potter and Black."

Sirius raised his eyebrows innocently. "C'mon, Sniv, er... Snape. Who cares? Will you get off your high horse and just 'teach' like you're supposed to?"

James chuckled, as did a couple of the Gryffindors nearby.

Severus felt his cheeks burn with suppressed rage. His grip on his wand instinctively tightened, but he took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a second, forcing himself to remain calm. He wasn't going to give Sirius what he wanted.

"I should have expected no less from you two," Severus replied coolly. "Very well, fine. Work together, but you won't be as successful as you would have been had you heeded my advice."

With a jerk, Severus turned away from the two troublemakers and returned to Lily, who gave him a smile. Severus wasn't going to be reduced to looking like every bit the idiot James and Sirius wanted him to appear, and so, he demonstrated the basic Disarming Spell on Lily, and she, in turn, did it to him.

"Hey, how come you're partnered with Evans?" Sirius called.

"I thought you said no friends as partners," James pointed out.

"Apparently the rules don't pertain to our esteemed teacher," Sirius added sarcastically.

"You may begin," Severus stated firmly and loudly over the two annoying Gryffindors. He chose to ignore their banter.

There were plenty of students present who genuinely wanted to learn how to effectively duel, and many of the younger ones didn't even know the Disarming Spell. Severus and Lily spent the rest of the time observing the others, pointedly avoiding James and Sirius, who were more making asses of themselves than anything. Several of the Slytherins kept glaring at them, shaking their heads, muttering about how immature they were.

After a little more than an hour, Severus called the session to an end. Many of the students had made good progress, and they didn't need to be pushed the way Severus had first taught Peter. He dismissed the lesson, saying they would meet again in a week. With everyone's busy schedules, it would be impossible to meet on any night other than Monday.

Once only Lily remained, Severus released a sigh he didn't know he had been holding.

"That was... rather taxing," he admitted, "but worth it, I think."

"You were wonderful, Sev," Lily stated. "And when James and Black tested your patience, you didn't give in."

"No, I didn't, and giving in would have been the reaction they were trying to provoke."

I should hope I'm beyond that by now... hopefully, Severus thought.

"Well, then, let's go," Lily said. "Until next time..."

"Until next time," Severus agreed.

Chapter Sixty-Two

November quickly progressed into December, followed shortly by the first snowfall of the season. The twelve traditional evergreens lined the Great Hall, and tinsel and bows decorated the halls as the mood seemed to change festive overnight. The unfortunate reality was, however, that the students were confined to roaming the corridors, staying in their common rooms, spending time in the courtyard, or not far from the castle outside. The usual visit to Hogsmeade when students would have made their holiday purchases would not be happening this year, but with anticipation of going home to see their families after nearly four months, students from every house were finding it more difficult to concentrate during class, much to their teachers' dismay and frustration.

Severus and Lily continued to lead the duelling lessons every Monday evening in the abandoned classroom, and when every session would end, Severus felt a renewed sense of worth. Instead of just pretending to be a student once again, he knew he was taking an active part in the war, and despite what he still saw as a failing with Peter Pettigrew, he was determined not to give up. James and Sirius was prone to misbehavior, but when the others present didn't find their antics humorous, they were taken down a peg or two, sobered into learning whatever spell was being taught that day. More importantly, Severus was pleased with the overall progress he was seeing in the students.

However, The tension in Slytherin house continued to gain momentum. There were minor outbursts between various students, but nothing major. Severus wasn't fooled, though. Mulciber or any of his followers could at any moment choose to start trouble.

With the way daily life had settled into a fairly comfortable routine, Severus's worries about the war were suppressed, although still there. He chose not to allow such thoughts to consume him. There were so many other things worth living for, and as Christmas approached, he wanted to be able to give Lily something special. He needed to return to the shop in Hogsmeade, but without the visits, the only way Severus and Lily could get to the place would be by breaking the rules... unless school wasn't in session.

One day after classes in mid-December, Severus approached Lily about this very problem.

"I have an idea," he said, "and wanted your input, Lily."

"All right," Lily replied, curious to know what it was.

"Since we can't go to Hogsmeade, and I really want you to have the chance to pick out your ring," Severus explained, a smile creeping onto his face, "I thought we could stay an extra day at Hogwarts and go then. School wouldn't be in session, and from Hogsmeade, we can Apparate home. There's really no need to take the train anymore."

Lily considered this. "You don't think we'll get in trouble? I mean, I know school won't be in session, but if we stay an extra day, won't we have to sign our names as some of the students wishing to stay for the holiday? And if that's the case, won't we still get in trouble?"

Lily liked Severus's idea, but she wasn't normally one to break school rules, and unlike Severus who was actually much older than school age and therefore didn't feel it necessary to follow the rules all the time, Lily was still a student.

"You do want to get a chance to pick out the ring, don't you, Lily?" Severus asked, feeling a bit put out.

"Of course I do!" Lily returned hastily, reaching for Severus's hand with her own. "But why don't we just... well," Lily paused, then a knowing look dawned in her eyes. "The train leaves from Hogsmeade. Why don't we just go with the other students on the day they're scheduled to depart, and we won't get on the train?"

"That would work," Severus conceded, relieved and glad she had agreed.

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As the days dwindled down to their final day at Hogwarts before returning home for Christmas, Severus felt the excitement returning. Lily would finally have the opportunity to choose a ring. As happy as

he was about this, though, Severus felt he wanted - no, needed - to do something more for Lily. In a few months, they would no longer be at Hogwarts, and while Severus looked forward to the freedom ahead, Hogwarts had still been an important part of his life, for both good and ill.

An idea came to him, and with only three days remaining, Severus knew he needed to act fast. The sun would be setting before dinner, and Severus wanted to use the remaining amount of daylight left. He whiled away through classes that day, growing anxious and impatient. He didn't share a single class with Lily, so he wouldn't get a chance to really talk to her until that afternoon, but at lunch, he did tell her to be sure to meet him in the Entrance Hall right after classes and to wear her coat.

Four o'clock finally arrived, and Severus wasted no time in returning his books to his room and grabbing his coat, hat, and gloves. He was already clad in his boots and wearing an extra thick robe. It wouldn't do to freeze while trying to give Lily a surprise she would hopefully love and never forget.

As he made his way through the corridors, Severus slipped on his coat, buttoning it haphazardly. He pulled the hat snugly over his head, pushing errant strands of hair away from his face. He was just putting on his gloves as he entered the Entrance Hall, pleased to find Lily already present. She was wearing her coat and had earmuffs on instead of a hat, leaving her lovely, long hair free to flow.

"So, what do you have up your sleeve, Sev?" Lily inquired as he took her hand and led her toward the door.

"Oh, you'll see," Severus replied nonchalantly, smirking.

"Hmm, I'm not sure I like the tone of your voice. Something tells me you're up to no good," Lily teased.

They stepped outside into the blistery cold, the wind whipping around them, sending snow squalls adrift.

"Surely you weren't planning on taking a stroll around the lake, were you?" Lily asked, not sounding too excited at the prospect.

"Of course not," Severus said. "I wouldn't put you through that. Besides, the snow must be close to a foot deep."

"Then, uh... Sev, what's going on?" Lily questioned, now beginning to sound unsure.

"You trust me," Severus stated, "so therefore, just go with it. I'd never do anything to make you uncomfortable. Now, hold tightly to my hand and run with me."

The area in front of the school where the path led toward the gates was clear, so they began sprinting down it, Lily having no idea what they were doing or why they were doing it. She suddenly felt her feet lifting off the ground and gasped, trying to pull herself back to the earth, but Severus held fast to her hand and then pulled her to him, wrapping his arms securely around her waist.

"Just relax," he intoned into her ear. "You're going to be fine."

For a second, Lily fought the urge to pull herself back to the ground, but from behind her, Severus was holding her, bringing her farther up into the frigid air. They continued to gain altitude, until they were maybe fifty feet above the snow-covered earth.

"We- we're flying!" Lily exclaimed, unable to believe what she was experiencing. "And without a broom!"

Severus laughed freely. "Yes, Lily, we are flying. See why I didn't tell you? To spoil the surprise would have eliminated the fun."

"This is... wow!" Lily cried. "I knew you could fly, but you're doing it holding me. How did you know you could?"

"I practiced holding things as I flew," Severus stated. "I don't need to use my arms. It's quite like flying on a broom, only without a broom."

"Amazing," Lily breathed.

They enjoyed the sights of the frozen lake, the white blanket of snow, and the castle a little way off in the distance for the next twenty minutes, and as the sun started to set, they were graced with the

most spectacular sight of all. The cold became too much to bear at one point, though, so Severus gingerly lowered them to the ground.

Even though her teeth were chattering, Lily remarked, "Thanks, Sev. That was great." She fixed him with a smile and kissed him.

Whether his cheeks were red from the cold, from her affections, or from both, Severus didn't know, but he returned the smile and started the trek back toward the castle. "I'm glad you liked it, Lily."

"I more than liked it," Lily affirmed.

"All right, you loved it."

"That I did."

While their short flight around the grounds had been wonderful, both Severus and Lily were grateful to be back inside. The warmth penetrated every part of them the moment they stepped back into the school.

"Thanks, Sev," Lily said sweetly to him before they went their separate ways.

x x x x x

The last day of school finally arrived, and Severus and Lily were packed and ready to go. They departed the school with the majority of the other students, taking the carriages back to the Hogsmeade station. Upon stepping off, however, Severus and Lily disappeared in the masses, conveniently unnoticed in the rush of excitement from the crowd to return home for Christmas.

Once they were far enough away, they quickly shrank their bags and stowed them in their pockets. They wasted no time in heading for the jewelry store.

Lily giggled. "I can't believe we're actually doing this. Do you think anyone will notice?"

"Hopefully not, but it wouldn't surprise me if Potter, being nosy like he is, goes looking for you on the train and can't find you," Severus said with a snort, but he was in too good of a mood to give a care as to what James might try.

Despite students no longer being allowed to visit Hogsmeade, there were still many people lining the streets. With only a few shopping days left before Christmas, people were hoping to find that special something for their loved one.

As Severus and Lily made their way down the main street, Severus tried not to think about their last trip here. When they eventually passed the alley where Peter's body had been found, a shudder went through Severus, and Lily blinked back tears.

"It's hard not to think about it, huh?" she asked.

Nodding, Severus replied, "Yes. It's strange being back here, but this is meant to be a good day, not like that day. Well, that day was going well until..."

Severus trailed off, not wishing to vocalize the tragedy. They came upon Gina's Jewelers. With a squeeze of Lily's hand, Severus stated, "We're here. Let's go in, and you can finally pick out the perfect diamond." Severus mustered a smile, the mixture of feelings causing both ecstatic anticipation and lingering sadness.

They entered the small store, and the lady behind the counter immediately recognized them. She warmly greeted them, inviting Lily to peruse the selection of rings and find what was perfect for her.

Lily stepped toward the counter and gazed down upon probably a hundred different rings.

"How can I decide?" she asked. "They're all so beautiful. Sev, maybe you can pick one for me?"

"No, Lily, you pick," Severus urged. "It has to be your decision."

Lily tried on a few different cuts, and she finally settled for a traditional gold band with a one karat round diamond in the center. It was simple, but elegant.

"I think this is the one," Lily affirmed, examining the ring in the light as she held her hand up. "What do you think, Sev?"

"It's lovely," Severus said gently. He leaned in and kissed her. "And now it's yours."

Lily wanted to ask how he could afford it, but didn't think it appropriate in a time like this. That would ruin the romantic moment, although not as terribly as the attack on the village had last time.

"We'll take it," Severus told the lady behind the counter. "I trust you still have the information you need as per our arrangement?"

The lady nodded her consent.

"It's taken care of," Severus asserted, now taking Lily's bejeweled hand in his own. "Are you ready to go home?"

Lily stared down at the ring and swallowed. "We'll have to tell my parents," she suddenly realized.

Severus smiled slightly, the butterflies of nerves awaking in his stomach. "Yeah, I guess we'll have to."

"Let's go," Lily said.

Hand-in-hand, they left the jewelry shop and Apparated to Spinner's End.

Author's Note: The idea of Severus flying with Lily came from Dark-Legends. Thanks!

Chapter Sixty-Three

The next thing they knew, Severus and Lily were standing in the sitting room of Severus's old home. Not being used for the past three and a half months, it smelled of dust and the general odor of stale air. Severus coughed a couple of times, setting his bags down.

"I guess this place needs a bit of cleaning," he remarked wryly.

"I'd say more than a bit," Lily said with a laugh.

"It's times like this I'm glad I'm a wizard," Severus said, and with a wave of his wand, he nonverbally cast a cleaning spell on the room, eradicating the pile up of dust.

"How do you manage to do nonverbal spells so easily?" Lily inquired. "I know we've been taught defensive spells for the past couple of years, but you've managed to perform all sorts of spells without saying a word."

Severus tried to appear nonplussed. He shrugged. "Practice, I guess. Before I started spending almost every hour of my free time with you," he said, smiling, "I had a lot more time on my hands." That much was true. Severus had spent much of his time alone, especially in his other life.

"Hmm," was all Lily said. "Well, do you want to head over to my house or spend more time here?"

Severus considered this, realizing they would need to tell her parents about the engagement.

"Er, have you given any thought as to how you want to break the news to your parents?" Severus asked nervously.

As much as Mr. and Mrs. Evans and he liked each other, Severus wasn't sure how they would take the news. Their youngest daughter was only seventeen, after all, and even Severus himself needed to be reminded of this from time to time. By his estimation, he would technically be turning forty in a few short weeks, seeing as this would be his second birthday since returning to life, but he didn't suppose

that was really how it worked. Severus wondered for a moment if there would ever be a time when his body would catch up to his mind, or would he always be mentally over twenty years older than his physical appearance?

Lily noticed Severus's hesitation, and she honestly didn't know what to reply. She took his hand and squeezed it reassuringly.

"It will be fine, whatever happens, Sev," she said. "I think it would be best for us both to be there and for it to be perhaps at a dinner or something. I would want everyone... yes, even Petunia, to be present. I wouldn't want to have to give any additional explanations later as to why I had left someone out of the important news."

"All right," Severus agreed. "How about I walk you home, then, and we can go from there?"

Lily nodded, and together, they left the house and began heading down Spinner's End. Walking was the preferred form of transport in a Muggle neighborhood, and besides, Lily's parents wouldn't appreciate being scared out of their skin because two people suddenly Apparated into their home. Petunia would most likely never let Lily hear the end of it. They turned the corner, going past the old playground, which was covered with snow. A few minutes later, they came to Lily's street and eventually to her house.

Lily opened the front door and announced, "I'm home!"

Mrs. Evans came down the hall toward them. "Lily... and Severus! How wonderful to see you again!" She embraced her daughter for a long time, and Severus gazed upon Lily's hand, noticing that she had taken the ring off. He hadn't noticed when that had happened, but she must have slipped it off sometime during their walk to her house.

Mr. Evans was upon them a moment later, heartily shaking Severus's hand. Severus didn't escape receiving a bone-crushing hug from Lily's mum, but when he could finally breathe again, he nodded and smiled back at them. His nerves didn't leave him the whole time, and as Lily began discussing her past few months at Hogwarts, they walked farther into the house and into the sitting room. Taking seats,

Severus kept more space between himself and Lily on the couch than he normally would have.

"Where's Petunia?" Lily inquired.

"Oh, she's not due back for a couple of days yet," Mr. Evans explained. "She's finishing exams this week at the university."

Lily nodded. As much as she wanted to tell her parents about the engagement, she was also dreading it. With Petunia not due back for a couple of days, she wondered how she could wait. She kept glancing over at Severus, wondering what was going through his mind. Severus was thinking the same things Lily was... What was she pondering?

"So, what's new with you, Severus?" Mrs. Evans suddenly asked.

The question forced Severus out of his reverie. Blinking a few times to clear his head, Severus sat up straighter and awkwardly cleared his throat. "Oh... you know, nothing but the usual," he lied.

"That's good, I suppose," Lily's mother replied kindly.

Severus only nodded, and a pregnant pause fell between the four of them.

"Would you like to come over for dinner tonight, Severus?" Mrs. Evans posed.

Severus gazed wide-eyed at her, then looked at Lily in askance.

"That would be nice, thank you," Severus said formally. He felt something drop inside, and he went numb. Would dinner mean telling Lily's parents about the engagement, and was Lily planning on telling them or leaving that up to him? As the man, he knew he should have asked her father's permission, had he gone by tradition, but Severus hadn't done so. All he could think about when he had asked Lily was how much he loved her and wanted to spend his life with her. Family hadn't come into the picture, but now it was, inevitably.

"Wonderful," Mrs. Evans said. "Well, you two can stay all afternoon if you wish. I am going to the kitchen to see what I need to prepare for dinner and if there's anything I may need to pick up from the store."

Mrs. Evans left, and Mr. Evans flipped the television on. Growing bored quickly, Lily ushered Severus upstairs, where he helped her with her bags.

Once they were in the confines of Lily's bedroom, Severus asked, "How do you want to tell your parents?"

"I'm not sure," Lily confessed. "I had hoped for Petunia to be around, too, but do you think doing it at dinner this soon would be appropriate? I mean, we just got back..."

"Well, if you wait, won't they wonder why you didn't tell them sooner?"

"Good point." Lily reached into her pocket and withdrew the ring. She held it up to the light and examined it before putting it back on. She then held out her hand and gazed upon it. "It's so beautiful, Sev."

Severus's face relaxed into a smile. Hearing her sweet voice confess her love for the ring put him at ease for the time being.

Coming to her from behind, Severus enveloped her and held her close. He breathed in the lilac smell of her hair and the soft scent of baby powder on her skin. Lily sighed and closed her eyes, easing into his touch. A slight smile graced her lips, and Severus nuzzled her neck, kissing her there.

"I want to be with you when you tell them," he said.

"I wouldn't have it any other way, Sev."

They spent the rest of the afternoon together, going outside for a walk at one point. When it came time for dinner, Severus felt his stomach start a series of flipflops as they descended the stairs and walked down the hall to the dining room. Mrs. Evans had the table set nicely, as she always did, and Mr. Evans was already seated in his usual spot at the head. Seeing the older man, who was probably actually only five or six years older than Severus truly was, Severus felt much

younger all of a sudden. He was in this man's house and had already asked his daughter to marry him, to be his instead.

Standing stiffly to the side, Severus held Lily's hand, a cold sweat forming on his palm. Lily felt him shaking and gave his hand a squeeze. Mrs. Evans walked into the room carrying a pot roast and set it on the table.

"Well, everything's ready," she said. Glancing at the two teenagers, Mrs. Evans cast them a quizzical look. "Well, do sit down, you two. Dinner is ready, and I won't have anyone standing in my dining room when there's good food on the table."

Again, feeling like a child, Severus was cowed. He released Lily's hand without protest and took his seat. Grace was said, and the dinner commenced. For five solid minutes, which could have been five hours for all the agonizing time it seemed to take for them to pass, Severus chewed methodically on his food, wishing he could savor it, but not hungry in the least.

"Is there something wrong with the roast, dear?" Mrs. Evans asked Severus, eyeing him curiously.

Placing his fork down, Severus glanced briefly at Lily, then replied, "No, Mrs. Evans, it's delicious. Thank you."

Mrs. Evans's face relaxed, and she smiled. "Well, good then. Now that we're settled, there's something we wanted to tell you."

Lily stopped eating, watching her mum's face closely. While Mrs. Evans was smiling, the smile seemed forced, and Lily thought she could see the telltale signs of tears forming in her eyes. Lily knew her mother couldn't have seen the ring, since she had taken it off again and stowed it in her pocket, so had she somehow found out about the engagement and was now upset?

"Mum-" Lily started to say, but Mr. Evans stilled his daughter by holding a hand up.

"Let your mother speak, Lily," he said.

Normally, when her father used those words, they would have sounded commanding, but his voice had wavered. Lily looked at her dad and saw that he, too, seemed about to cry.

"Mum, Dad... what's going on?" she asked, confused and worried.

Severus watched silently, feeling helpless. His hand searched for Lily's under the table and took it.

"Lily, honey," Mrs. Evans said in a strained voice, "I have something important to tell you. I- I'm sick."

"Sick?" Lily echoed, her voice very small. "How? With what?"

Mrs. Evans picked up the serviette and dabbed at her eyes, then blew her nose.

Mr. Evans, figuring his wife was too choked up to continue, spoke instead. "Your mum has breast cancer, Lily. We just found out earlier this week and figured we would wait until you were home to tell you, instead of having you left at school to worry. And with Severus here beside you, we knew it would help. Severus, I hope you don't mind. I'm sorry... if this is uncomfortable for you."

"No, it's fine," Severus said, saddened by the news. All of a sudden, announcing their engagement seemed trivial and inappropriate.

Lily began crying, the tears trailing down her face. The plate of food in front of her forgotten, she cast an apologetic look at Severus and stood, going to her mother and hugging her. Mrs. Evans returned the embrace, and for a long time, they held each other, crying into each other's arms.

Severus, despite saying otherwise, felt uncomfortable. He would look over at Lily's father occasionally, but Mr. Evans's eyes were fixed solely on his daughter and wife. Severus wished he knew what to do, but he could do nothing. No words he could say would remove the cancer. He reflected on his other life, knowing that Lily's parents had died before she had been killed, but he didn't know how or when they had died, exactly. He was pretty sure it hadn't been while they were still at Hogwarts, as he figured he would have heard about it.

Finally, Lily broke apart from her mother and sat back down.

"What... what's the plan?" she asked, trying to compose herself, hoping for a solution.

"The surgery is scheduled on the twenty-seventh, and then I will have to go through several rounds of chemo," Mrs. Evans explained. "It's likely I'll lose my hair. I never... I always loved my hair. I know it sounds so petty."

"It's not petty, Mum," Lily gently argued. "But if it winds up working, it's worth it. Better to lose your hair than your life."

"Yes, yes, that's definitely true," Lily's mother conceded. She seemed to be returning to more of her usual cheery self. "Well, now that you know, let's not dwell on it, shall we? Severus, I hope you're okay, dear."

Severus looked upon the older woman in shock. Here she had just told them she had cancer, and she was concerned about him, simply because he might be uneasy?

"No, Mrs. Evans, really," Severus said sincerely, "I'm fine. I'm sorry to hear about your cancer. I hope the Healers, er... the doctors find everything and that you make a full recovery."

Nice people like you don't deserve to die so young, Severus thought depressingly.

"Thank you, Severus. You're a nice boy. I'm glad our Lily has you in her life. You're like part of the family, which is why we wanted you to be here when we told the bad news."

Severus felt warm at her words and simply nodded, his mouth full of food. He wasn't used to such kindness and gratitude. He belonged, which was more than he could ever say about his own family.

The rest of the meal progressed in lapses of silence, but Lily spoke about Hogwarts and inquired after Petunia. It seemed the family was trying not to talk about the cancer on purpose, yet it was there, like a purple elephant standing on the table.

Afterward, Lily and Severus retreated to her room. Lily was oddly quiet, and Severus knew what was on her mind.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he posed gingerly.

"What more can I say?" Lily asked, staring at the wall. "What... what if she dies, Sev?"

Severus felt her heart breaking, shattering to pieces, within his chest. He came to her and pulled her to him, letting her bury her face in his shirt. Rubbing her head and running his hands through her hair, Severus murmured into her ear, "She's strong, Lily. She will fight this, and we'll be there for her. Your dad will be there with her every step of the way, and even Petunia will be there. She's going to be all right."

Lily pulled away a little and gazed into Severus's eyes with hers. "How do you know?" she said softly.

He didn't know, but pressing a tender kiss to her forehead, Severus affirmed, "You taught me the difference between having faith and not. Believing in the good is a much better place to be than letting our fears consume us, don't you think?"

Lily nodded hollowly. "I wish... D'you think magic could fix it?"

Severus shook his head sadly. "There are some things even magic can't fix, Lily; you know that," he murmured gently. "But you love her, and that's stronger than magic."

"How can you be so sure?"

Severus could be sure of love, for he had seen how it had transformed his own life. He was a believer now in powers greater than what man possessed with magic alone.

"Because," he said simply, "I have you."

"And I have you," Lily returned.

Author's Note: The drawing I did a few chapters back, the one I said was for a future chapter, well, that's this chapter. If you want to see said drawing again, it's here: [sindie11 . deviantart . com / art / The-Moment-76871871](https://www.deviantart.com/sindie11/art/The-Moment-76871871) (remove spaces).

Please don't ask me if Lily's parents live or die in this story. I'm not going to tell you!

And something I meant to say a few chapters back and forgot: I don't hate Dumbledore... or Sirius! They have been portrayed a certain way because this story is mostly from Severus's perspective, just as the Harry Potter books are from Harry's perspective... hence the bias.

Chapter Sixty-Four

Severus returned home late that night, finding that he didn't want to be alone anymore. He used to value solitude, but now had reached a point where he felt he had spent too many days by himself. Spinner's End, being the empty and cold place of his childhood, did not bring him the familiar comfort of having walls on all sides any longer.

The Evanses were practically a family to him already. The news of Mrs. Evans's cancer had been unexpected and disheartening, making Severus realize that foreknowledge of the deaths of Lily's parents would do him no good. Even if he could bring himself to tell her what he knew, she wouldn't understand. Breaking the news of the engagement was put on hold for the time being, as Severus knew Lily's mind would be occupied with her mum's cancer and the rough road ahead.

Severus went upstairs and stared at his trunk. It was pointless to unpack everything and put it in drawers, seeing as he would only be here for a couple of weeks. He shrugged off his clothing, throwing it unceremoniously onto the floor, and changed for bed, slipping under the covers. At least his own bed was welcoming, if nothing else.

His last thoughts before drifting off to sleep were of his own father. Severus wondered what state he would find Tobias in... if Tobias was still even living in the same place. For both of their sakes, Severus hoped his father had stayed clean and decent.

He would find out in the morning.

When morning came, Severus slept in some. The days were among the shortest of the year now, so even the sunrise was late. He eventually rose from bed and went about showering and dressing, wrinkling his nose in distaste at the Muggle clothes he was choosing. Robes were much more convenient and didn't require giving much thought, and all of Severus's Muggle clothes were hand-me-downs from his father, left with the faint scent of booze, no matter how many times they had been cleaned.

He had a quick breakfast consisting of merely tea, making a note to stop at the store to pick up a few items later that day. No food in the

house wouldn't do, even if he wasn't planning on eating at home often. Severus was fairly confident he knew the location of his father's flat well enough to Apparate instead of taking the public transport, and there was an alley not far from the flat Tobias occupied that would do.

Severus closed his eyes and focused on the spot, and with a pop, he Apparated to the very alley he had pictured in his mind moments before. Appearing behind a dumpster and several dust bins, Severus made a face and held his nose at the rancid odor emanating from the rubbish. Quickly moving away, Severus glanced at a sign from a Chinese restaurant.

He crossed the street, careful not to slip on the ice, and now stood in front of Tobias's flat complex. Trash littered the curbside, and the snow along the street was black with grim from the traffic. Any of the cars lining the street were at least ten years old and rusty. The rundown areas of Manchester seemed to be all Tobias would ever know.

Severus pulled his coat's collar closer and began the trek toward the building. He entered and went to the second floor, stopping in front of the correct door.

He knocked.

A shuffle came from inside, and within a few seconds, the door opened. Tobias stood there, an annoyed expression briefly crossing his face, which disappeared upon seeing Severus.

"Severus!" he exclaimed, and he actually smiled. Tobias was still wearing a T-shirt and sweatpants, but his hair was combed, and he had shaven. Severus even noticed that his beer gut was smaller.

"Hello, Father," replied Severus, smiling slightly.

"I wasn't sure when to expect you... or if you'd even come back," Tobias said, opening the door farther to admit his son.

Severus stepped into the flat and looked around. Its furnishings were simple, but the place was overall clean. Gazing upon his father again, Severus stated, "You're looking well. Have you been exercising?"

Tobias shrugged. "Not really." He gazed down at his stomach and remarked, "I suppose stopping drinking has helped tremendously."

Severus nodded. An awkward silence fell between them. While Severus was glad to see his father doing well, their rocky past made it difficult for any deep or meaningful conversation. Finally, Severus decided he might as well just tell his father the truth.

"You seem to be doing well. I'm glad."

"Thanks," Tobias said. "It's nothing impressive, but it's become home." He motioned around the flat.

"So, you're still working, then?" Severus asked.

Tobias nodded. "Yes, and there's a group of guys who I meet with weekly. We keep each other in check. No drinking, period. One bloke said he'd gone out with his wife for their anniversary two weeks ago, and he'd had a glass of wine, and then when he got home, he drank a whole bottle. Said he felt like a right idiot for it the next day."

"I trust you're not keeping any alcohol in the flat, Father? The temptation-"

"No, nothing," Tobias roughly cut him off. "You can search the whole flat if you need convincing, Severus."

"I wasn't insinuating that you were hiding any," Severus replied pointedly. He sighed, then said in a calmer voice, "Look, let's not start arguing."

"I agree," Tobias replied. "My temper always got the best of me."

"I know," Severus muttered bitterly. "I inherited that and your nose from you."

"Sorry about that, especially the nose," Tobias jested. "I wouldn't wish this schnoz on anybody." He touched his hooked appendage.

Severus laughed, shaking his head. "There are worse things." Sobering, he thought of his engagement with Lily, then said, "I should tell you, Father... I'm engaged to Lily."

"Engaged? Already?" Tobias asked, surprised. "My, Severus, you are a man now, aren't you? Well, congratulations!"

The approval in Tobias's tone was a welcome surprise. Severus hadn't really given much thought to telling his father, and he hadn't known what to expect from him.

"Thank you," Severus replied.

"It would be nice... if it's okay with you, of course... to properly meet Lily," Tobias pointed out. "I'm afraid the only times I had seen her before were when I was drunk. Of course, I can't imagine she would feel particularly included to meet me, but if she is-"

"Lily would meet you, Father," Severus said sincerely. "She's a kind person and isn't going to hold your past against you."

"She sounds like a wonderful young lady already."

"She is; she really is."

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After a good visit with his father, Severus returned home, heading out briefly to buy some groceries. Once that task was complete, he went to Lily's house.

"Petunia is due back a day early," Lily told him after letting him into the house, "so she'll be here for dinner. You're invited to stay, of course."

"Thanks," Severus said. He kept his mouth shut about Petunia, knowing he was likely to say something scathing.

Lily directed Severus to the sitting room, where her father was holding a cumbersome evergreen tree. Lily's mum was standing in the middle of the room, giving instructions as to where she thought

the tree should go, but as soon as Mr. Evans would place the tree there, she would change her mind, much to his dismay. Lily giggled at the display before her, and Severus's mouth twitched a bit. He never understood why women would insist on decorations being perfect... as if perfection could really ever be achieved.

Finally, Mrs. Evans seemed satisfied. "There, that's just right," she remarked. "Well, maybe move it slightly to the left, Ross. We want to keep it centered in the front window."

Mr. Evans moved the tree a couple of inches and stepped back, wiping his brow. "Sweet heavens, Vi," he said, out of breath. "If I didn't love you so much..."

Mrs. Evans giggled in the same tone Lily used, appropriately sounding like bells at Christmas. She glanced over at her daughter and Severus and beamed.

"You're just in time to decorate the tree," she said excitedly.

Mr. Evans looked at Severus and laughed. "By the expression on Severus's face, I would say he isn't too inclined to follow your suggestion, dear."

Lily turned toward Severus, saying in a low voice, "You don't have to if you don't want to, but remember when we were kids? You used to love decorating the tree with us."

"That's because I never had a tree at home after I was seven," Severus mumbled, speaking before he realized the words had escaped his mouth. Embarrassed at his admission in front of Lily's family, he blushed a light red on his pale cheeks.

"All the more reason to join us, Severus," Mrs. Evans said gently. "Come on, dear..."

Severus sighed and gave in. "All right."

Severus spent the afternoon with Lily's family, feeling every bit as wanted and loved as a son. He had always liked Lily's parents, but now, being engaged to their daughter and knowing that Mrs. Evans

was sick, he let the feeling of warmth brought by the season penetrate him to the fullest.

Once the box of lights and ornaments was empty, Lily gazed into it to make sure they hadn't missed anything. She suddenly reached into the bottom, pulling out a picture. She held it deftly in her hands and smiled fondly.

"Look, Sev," she whispered in awe.

Severus glanced around and saw that they were now alone. He stepped toward Lily and gazed down at the picture. There stood younger versions of themselves. They were dressed for the winter weather and were playing out in the snow. Lily was holding his hand and grinning at him, and little Severus was giving little Lily a tentative look, unsure of himself and her affection toward him.

Severus felt his heart rate increase, and a surge of memories came back to him from that day so long ago. He remembered feeling uneasy and warm at Lily's holding of his hand. On the picture, Lily's scrawl from when she was nine read, "Christmas '69, Severus & Me - Best Friends."

"I had forgotten about this picture," Lily said in awe. "I remember that day now." Her hand found his.

"What- what was it doing in this box?" Severus asked.

"I hung it on the tree that year... our first Christmas. Wow, Sev... that was eight years ago. Can you believe it?"

"Seems like longer ago than that, even," Severus murmured. It was true for him, after all.

Lily didn't find anything strange about his statement, though. "Yes, it was a while ago. We were so young."

"You're still young," Severus said, then realized how foolish he sounded. "Er... I mean, we're both still young."

Lily laughed. "I know. It's not like we're forty or something."

Severus's heart skipped a beat. For a second, he almost withdrew his hand from Lily. If only she knew his true age... Would she think him old and strange for going after her? He mentally shook his head. No, Lily loved him, and he knew better.

Lily noticed Severus's quietness and asked, "Are you okay, Sev?"

"What? Oh, I'm fine. Just... memories." He forced a smile and squeezed her hand, relieved he hadn't let go. He was more sure of himself than the little boy in that picture, but sometimes, he found himself slip briefly back into that child again.

Just then, the front door opened, and a shrieky voice announced, "I'm home!"

Lily released Severus's hand in her surprise at seeing Petunia return. She placed the picture back in the box and gave Severus a quick smile as she walked past him to greet her sister.

"Petunia!" Lily exclaimed.

Petunia gave Lily a brief smile and exchanged a short hug with her. Ever since the summer, they had been on better terms, but they still weren't particularly close. Lily tried her best to be friendly toward her older sister, wishing to keep a relationship with her and not give Petunia reason to think she was being left behind.

Petunia's gaze drifted to the sitting room, and she and Severus met eyes. Severus stared back at her and gave her a nod, but didn't say anything. Before she could react, Severus stepped out of view. Within a few seconds, Mr. and Mrs. Evans had joined the reunion, and for a moment, Severus felt like an intruder. Having Petunia around made him uncomfortable. When it was just Lily and her parents, he felt fine, but for some reason, he couldn't welcome Petunia the same way.

There were pleasantries exchanged in the hall, and the voices grew hushed. Severus thought he heard Lily's parents saying they needed to talk with Petunia alone, and soon after that, Lily came back into the sitting room, finding Severus on the couch.

She took a seat next to him and joined him in staring straight ahead. On the wall where their eyes rested, a large photograph of the Evans family from about ten years earlier hung. Petunia and Lily both had their hair in curly pigtails with ribbons, their smiles marked with missing teeth.

"They're going to tell her about the cancer," Lily said in a hollow voice.

Severus nodded blankly and took her hand. He didn't know what to say. What *could* he say?

Lily lapsed into silence for another minute. Then he heard a sniffle, and a small sob was emitted from her mouth. Severus's chest clenched, and he turned, seeing that tears were streaming down her face. Severus pulled her close and wrapped her in his arms and just held her, letting her cry.

After some time, Lily's sobs subsided, and Severus loosened his grip on her enough for her to sit up. Wiping her nose on her sleeve, Lily sniffled again.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"There's nothing to be sorry for," Severus assured her, kissing her tenderly on the forehead.

Lily only nodded and wiped at her face more. "Do you... do you think we should tell them tonight?"

"About the engagement?" Severus asked softly.

"Yes."

"That's up to you, Lily."

"I don't know... Would it be okay? I mean, if my mum's dying, isn't it better she knows now? Maybe it will be something for them to be happy about."

"You don't know she's dying, Lily," Severus gently argued. "I should hope it would be taken well, but what if it just adds to their stress?"

Lily sighed. "I know my parents, Sev. It won't."

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When dinner time arrived a couple of hours later, Severus and Lily felt much the same way they had the night before, only guilty as well. Severus hoped Lily was right in guessing how her parents would take the news about their engagement. He would know momentarily.

Once dinner began and everyone had been served, Lily said, "I, uh... There's something I'd like to share with you all, now that Petunia is back home."

Petunia gave her sister a quizzical look, her eyes still red from crying over the news about her mother. Lily's parents, however, cast her encouraging looks, so Lily reached deep for her prided Gryffindor courage and stated, "Severus and I... well, we're- we're engaged." She quickly slipped the ring on beneath the table and held up her hand for her family to see.

For a few seconds, the silence was drawn out. Then Petunia stood, put her napkin on the table, and left without a word. Mrs. Evans's face slowly cracked into a smile, and Mr. Evans glanced from Lily to Severus and finally to his wife, finding himself smiling as well.

"Well, this is most unexpected-" Mr. Evans started to say.

"But wonderful nonetheless," Mrs. Evans finished. "My only thought is... aren't you a bit young, Lily? Severus, you know we love you, dear, and nothing would make us happier, but you do realize you're only seventeen?"

"Indeed," Mr. Evans added. "But... if you are happy, then we are happy for you."

Lily sighed in relief. "Thank you, Mum, Dad... I'm sorry for the shock." She looked at Petunia's empty seat in sadness. "It would seem Petunia doesn't share in the happiness, though."

Severus remained quiet. In all honesty, he wasn't the least bit surprised by Petunia's reaction. He found he could breathe easier

knowing the news of their engagement had been well-received by Lily's parents.

"It's something to be joyful about," Mrs. Evans conceded. "We needed some good news around here." Her smile faded when her eyes rested upon Petunia's empty chair.

"And since no one has officially said it yet: Congratulations," Mr. Evans added, his concern over Petunia showing.

"Thank you," Lily repeated.

"Thanks," Severus echoed, his eyes on Petunia's seat. Even though he was thankful for the positive reception of their news, he had a sinking feeling that Petunia would have something to say otherwise.

Chapter Sixty-Five

Lily found herself staring at the grains and patterns in the wood that composed Petunia's bedroom door. Severus had left a few minutes ago, and while her parents were downstairs cleaning up after dinner, Lily had excused herself, hoping to talk to her estranged sister.

Raising her hand to knock on the door, Lily hesitated and pulled it back. What could she say to Petunia that would make everything all right again? Then again, things hadn't exactly been fine between the two sisters. Petunia refused to be in contact with Lily when she was at Hogwarts.

"I don't want any owls pecking at the window to my dormitory," Petunia had insisted shrilly. "What would the other girls think?"

Exactly, thought Lily bitterly. *You wouldn't want to be a freak, would you, Petunia?*

With the wrong kinds of thoughts now in her head, Lily knocked on the door, suddenly angry.

"Don't waste your time or mine," Petunia's nasty voice came from the other side of the door. "Just go away."

"Petunia," Lily tried not to shout. "There are other ways I can open the door. Surely you remember the incident in the bathroom?"

Suddenly the door was open, and Petunia was standing there, glaring daggers at Lily. "Oh, yes, I remember that quite well," Petunia said shortly. "I won't have you showing off your magic tricks."

With a long-suffering sigh, Lily held her hands up in surrender. "Fine. But you and I are going to talk."

"That's rich of you, Lily. You're as considerate as always. It would seem you've spent so much time around that Snape boy, you're now emulating his mannerisms."

"Stop calling him that," Lily argued. "Better I be like him than you, it would seem. Now, come on, Petunia. What's the matter?"

"Oh, so now you act like you care?" Petunia spat. "'What's the matter?' you ask? Ha! First of all, I seem to remember you having a problem with me being engaged a few months ago, saying *I* was too young to get married! Now, here you are, *seventeen* bloody years old and engaged! Isn't that ironic? And you tried to be all compassionate and kind, saying I would find someone and all that rubbish?"

Lily bit her lip guiltily and tried to speak, but Petunia went on. "Oh, no! You wanted to know 'what's the matter.' Now you're going to find out, since you're so damn insistent in barging into my room. Let's see. What else? Ah, yes! You and Snape rudely chase off my fiance, and you get to have your man, who had the nerve to insult Vernon like that. Vernon may not have been the nicest bloke in the world, but he was far more decent than that freak from the rundown side of the neighborhood you've been clinging to since you were nine!"

"Don't you *dare* bring Severus into this!" Lily cried back, ready to slap her sister's long face.

"Shut up!" Petunia shrieked, hot tears marking her reddened cheeks. "As if all that weren't bad enough, you come and drop this bomb on the family, a matter of hours after I've just gotten home and found out that Mum is potentially dying! You try to pride yourself on being 'kind!' What a load of rubbish stinking this otherwise decent household! How *could* you, Lily?! You're so taken with Snape that you can't even give a thought about anyone else!"

"That's not true!" Lily protested, tears now streaming down her face. Feeling ashamed, Lily tried to apologize. "I didn't mean-"

"Girls!" Mrs. Evans's voice broke in.

Lily and Petunia simultaneously turned their heads and saw their mother and father standing at the top of the stairs. Mrs. Evans looked distressed, and she had the telltale signs of tears marring her face as well. Her husband took her by the waist as she turned and sobbed into his shoulder.

Disappointment etched all over his normally friendly face, Mr. Evans said, "What is going on up here? All this shouting... We could hear every word downstairs, and the neighbors may have heard you for all

we know. Now they possibly know about your mother's condition. Petunia, Lily, this is not how we raised you! Yes, your mother is sick, but instead of coming together for her, you're both up here throwing blame around like a cheap joke. Don't make a mockery of this situation because you two can't see reason to put your personal feelings aside."

Lily wiped at her face and approached her parents pleadingly. "Mum, Dad, I'm sorry." She reached out to them, but her father held his wife protectively to him as she continued to sob.

"I think it's time you go to bed," Mr. Evans stated, booking no room for argument. "Christmas is three days away. I should hope it's not ruined now. Good night."

Lily and Petunia exchanged desperate looks, but then just as soon glowered at each other. There were no words to be found to heal the brokenness. The gaping wound in the Evans household had been forced open again, only the pain was beyond anything Lily had even felt before. She went to her room and cried herself to sleep.

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Lily avoided Petunia as much as possible in the following days. She showed up at Severus's doorstep the next day and insisted on staying over his house all day, saying she couldn't return home, not knowing what was waiting for her back there. So followed the next day with the same result. Severus tried to reassure her that she was still welcome at home, despite the hardships, but Lily would hear nothing of it.

"It's my fault, Sev," she said for the third time that day. "I can't even look in their eyes, especially my mum's. I feel like I've disappointed her."

"Nonsense," Severus gently chided her. "I'll admit... we should have waited and told your family about the engagement. I don't sympathize with Petunia often, but she had been through a big shock already."

"Well, it's too late now," Lily uttered softly.

They were sitting on the rugged couch in the sitting room, and Lily was staring into the flames in the fireplace. She drew her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, resting her chin on her knees. Severus gave her a concerned look and placed his arm around her, pulling her close.

"You can stay here as long as you wish," he said, "but tomorrow is Christmas. You should be with your family."

"I want to be with you."

"And so you are. I... I assume there's a dinner tomorrow?" Severus asked carefully.

"Yes," Lily breathed. "Even though she's a mess, my mum is trying to be strong and act like everything is normal. I even tried to tell her I'd cook, even though I'm rubbish at it, but she would hear nothing of it. She insisted on making the Christmas dinner... You're invited, of course. But, Sev, I don't know. Maybe I'm being stupid, but my mum's rejection of my offer felt like a rejection of me. Like I said, it's like I've completely disappointed her... them. I keep telling myself that it's just that my mum loves to cook, but a part of me doesn't want to believe that."

"Lily," Severus said kindly, "you're anything but stupid. I'm sure she appreciates your offer, but like you said, she is used to doing the Christmas dinner. She probably is just trying to keep her mind off the cancer and the surgery in three days."

"I know," Lily sighed, "but what am I supposed to do? That damned cancer! Sev, *why* can't magic help? What good is it to have these powers if there's nothing we can do?" she posed desperately.

"Medicine is one of those things where Muggles are further along than wizards," Severus explained. "Remember my concerns with my mum? St. Mungo's won't hear of admitting a Muggle, and that's unfortunate. Something should be done..."

Severus thought about his past life, recalling that Muggles weren't admitted for treatment at St. Mungo's unless their injuries had been

due to a magical accident. Even then, they were promptly Obliviated, and those treatments hadn't begun until some time in the mid-1980s.

"The Ministry needs to change its law," Lily huffed, now withdrawing her knees and placing her feet back on the floor. She sat up straighter. "When I'm done at Hogwarts, I'm going to do something about it."

"That's a good plan," Severus agreed. "I, too, believe something needs to be changed. I had thought of going into Healing after school. That would be the appropriate field to research in."

Severus believed it appropriate he do something that was the opposite of what he had done when getting out of Hogwarts the first time. Being a Death Eater, he had been responsible for doing harm and creating poisons, but now, he felt his talents were suited for doing good, and that didn't mean only in fighting.

"You would do research into cancer?" Lily asked, touched and surprised.

"Yes," Severus affirmed. "As I said, I had considered going into Healing for a while now, but ever since your mum got sick, it seemed all the more important. You're not going to lose her, Lily."

"You are sweet, Sev." Lily leaned in and kissed him.

After the kiss, Severus said, "My father would like to get the chance to meet you properly. I know you don't want to be at home on Christmas, but we still ought to spend time with your family at dinner. I was thinking that earlier tomorrow... I would invite my father over. Would you come, Lily?"

"Of course I would," Lily replied, relieved to have a reason to be at his home again. "I would like to meet the man whose son I'm marrying."

"You're sure?" Severus questioned. "I'm not trying to force you-"

"I'm sure," Lily stated firmly. "I know your past with him was rocky, and I- I remember the condition he was in last year, but from what

you've told me about him, he's really changed. He can't be all that bad. You are his son, after all."

Severus snorted. "You'll find out tomorrow, I suppose."

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Christmas Day dawned and turned into a beautiful day. The sun was out and shining on the shimmering snow. Severus went about his usual morning routine, hoping things would go smoothly, both in the meeting between Lily and his father and later at Lily's house.

He went downstairs to the kitchen and set the table. The breakfast he had planned was nothing fancy or special, and compared to Mrs. Evans's dining room table, the kitchen table was simple. Just as Severus was about to get breakfast started, a knock came from the door. Wondering who had arrived early, Severus opened the door to find Lily standing there.

"Happy Christmas, Sev," she said the moment she stepped inside, dragging some snow in with her.

"Happy Christmas, Lily," Severus returned. "You're a bit early."

She gave him a knowing look. "My house," she stated, trying not to frown.

"Right, well... I was just about to get started. I don't suppose you'd like some coffee?"

"Sure, that'd be nice," Lily said, following Severus to the kitchen. "I can help," she offered.

"No, that's all right," Severus replied without thinking. He poured a cup for Lily and handed it to her, seeing the withdrawn expression clouding her face. "I didn't mean-" he started to say.

"I know; that's okay, Sev," Lily said, forcing a smile. She obligingly took the cup, cradling it between both hands, and took a sip. She sat down and watched as Severus set about putting some sausages on the stove.

"Did you open presents this morning?" Severus inquired, hoping to lighten Lily's spirits.

"Yes. It was nothing special, really. Petunia and I had each gotten the other something, but when she looked at the scarf I knitted for her, she didn't seem to like it. It got thrown into the closet with a dozen others."

"I'm sorry," Severus murmured. "She should have appreciated the time and effort you put into it. If she really doesn't want it, you can always give it to me. I'll wear it." Severus smiled, joking.

"I don't think you'd want it," Lily laughed a little. "It's pink and purple."

Severus's face twisted in mock disgust, although the truth was he had no desire to wear such colors. "Yes, you're right. It's not my color."

"Black is your color... with occasional greys and greens," Lily observed. "Why is that, Sev?"

He shrugged. "Never really thought about it. Most of the Muggle clothes I have are old and ratty... my father's. There are a couple pairs of blue jeans I'll wear, but his shirts are red. I only like red on you... your hair."

Just then, more knocking came. "That would be my father," Severus stated. He had just finished cooking the plain breakfast and so went to the door to let his father in.

Tobias was shivering on the front step, and he gratefully entered his old home when Severus invited him in.

"It smells good," he said, eyeing the kitchen. Seeing Lily there, Tobias added, "And your lovely fiancée is already here, I see."

Severus grimaced at his father's oily charm. "Don't mind him," Severus called over to Lily.

Lily smiled and approached the two men. "Hello, Mr. Snape," she greeted him, holding out her hand.

Tobias shook her hand, taking it in his own and examining the ring. "Nice ring," he observed. "And there's no need to be so formal, Lily. It's just Tobias."

"All right," Lily said a bit awkwardly. She wasn't accustomed to addressing adults by their given names, but quickly recovering, said, "Thanks," in regards to his comments on the ring.

"Well, breakfast is ready," Severus announced, unsure of how the interaction between Lily and Tobias would go. He had a hard enough time speaking with Tobias. He wondered what Lily could possibly say to him.

Breakfast was served, and ten minutes into the meal, Lily was laughing at an off color joke Tobias said.

"Did you like that?" Tobias asked, smirking. "I've got plenty more. The guys at work and I share them all the time."

"Er, that's quite all right, Father," Severus cut in, thinking his father's words too brash.

"No, it's okay," Lily said as her laughter broke up. "I just... wow, I've never known an adult who was willing to share something like that with me. Usually I only hear those kinds of things at school."

Severus groaned, which emboldened Tobias, who said teasingly, "I think we'd best stop for Severus's sake, my dear. He's not a happy bloke right now."

"Thank you," Severus muttered.

The rest of the meal went well, and after the kitchen was cleaned, the three of them moved into the sitting room.

"I see you've done away with the old telly," Tobias pointed out. "But the couch is still here."

Yes, Severus couldn't help but think bitterly, *your favorite place to pass out after you were too pissed to stand.*

"I may replace it one day when I can afford to," Severus said, hoping his father got the message.

Tobias reddened slightly, but didn't pursue the subject. Before Severus knew it, Tobias was telling more of his awful jokes, much to Lily's amusement. Severus had no idea she had such a raunchy sense of humor, but he loosened up with time and occasionally broke a smile at the punch lines. They spent an entire morning together, and Severus found himself pleasantly surprised by the interaction. They didn't exchange gifts, but the gift of having a decent father, even if Tobias wasn't much of a father figure, was more than he could have hoped for last year.

When the time came from Tobias to depart, Tobias firmly shook Severus's hand, and then, to Severus's surprise, Tobias pulled him into a hug. For a moment, Severus stiffened, but he relaxed enough to briefly return the gesture.

"I won't forget this, Severus," Tobias whispered, so only his son could hear. "Thank you for not giving up on me."

Hearing the rough emotion in his father's voice, Severus offered him a quick, tight-lipped smile and nodded. "Take care, Dad."

Tobias's face softened at hearing the word "Dad" and gave his son one last pat on the back before heading toward the door. "Goodbye, Lily!" he called. "It was a pleasure meeting you."

"And you, Mr. Sn- er, Tobias!" Lily called back from the sitting room. "Happy Christmas!"

Tobias headed out into the snow and was gone.

"Your father is quite funny," Lily told Severus. "You never told me he had such a sense of humor."

"I didn't know that about him," Severus admitted. "There's a lot I don't know about him."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean-"

"No, it's okay. Now, are you ready to head over to your place?" Severus asked softly, knowing Lily wasn't looking forward to the Christmas dinner with her family like she usually did.

Lily nodded. "Yes, we should get going. It wouldn't help matters any to be late."

Severus grabbed her coat and offered it to her. Lily took it and slipped it on, while Severus reached for his coat. After putting on their hats and gloves, they headed out into the snowy afternoon, the sun still shining. They walked through the silent streets, past the abandoned playground, and finally to Lily's street.

"No children are playing outside," Lily observed. "We used to be outside every Christmas when we were kids. Remember, Sev?"

"Like in the picture," Severus said quietly.

"Yes, like that picture. Those were happy times," Lily reminisced.

"As are these times," Severus pointed out gently, his hand taking hers. "I know things seem difficult right now, but you have a good family Lily. They do love you."

"Even Petunia?"

"I think... I think there's a lot of bitterness getting in the way, but how could she not love you? What's not to love about you?"

"I'm not the perfect person you think I am, Sev. Around Petunia - I don't know - I just lose my temper easily. I find it hard to tolerate her rudeness."

"No one's perfect," Severus said, "but you know that. Some people... and I ought to know... just push the wrong buttons. You put up with a lot from me over the years. You can handle Petunia."

"But you were worth it," Lily stressed. "I don't- Is Petunia?"

Severus couldn't believe what he was hearing from Lily. It seemed uncharacteristic of her to speak negatively about anyone. Even

though he didn't care much about Petunia, he knew that if Lily's relationship with her sister was severed, Lily would suffer and be the worse off for it, even if she didn't believe that now. Instead, he felt something deeper was bothering her and so asked, "Is it really Petunia that's the issue here, Lily? Or about you upset about your mum and projecting it this way?"

They were now standing at the bottom of the driveway to Lily's house. Lily gazed uncertainly at the house.

"I don't want to go in there," she muttered.

"Lily, answer my question," Severus insisted, hoping he wasn't coming across the wrong way.

He brought his hand to her face and turned her head, meeting her eyes. "Tell me, Lily."

"I- Yes, I'm afraid of what's to happen. If she dies, Sev, I don't know what I'll do. It'll tear the family apart. Mum was always the one who kept us all together."

"Your father-"

"Is a kind enough man, but he always let Mum take charge. He'll be a wreck if she goes."

"Listen to me, Lily," Severus said firmly and gently at the same time. "I know how it feels to lose a parent, so I speak from experience when I tell you that you will feel an emptiness you won't be able to fill. My mum was already gone years before she died, and even though my father is still alive, he's not much of a father to me. I'm of age and can live without depending on him. If anything, he's more like a loose friend, so I don't really have anyone I'd consider a parent in my life. Your parents are the closest thing to that for me. If she does die, Lily, you, your father, and Petunia will be stronger than you think. I know you well enough to tell you this honestly. No matter what happens, you will get through it... because you have to. Now, if this is her last Christmas, and I pray it isn't, then we ought to be inside celebrating it with her. It's precious... life."

Lily's eyes had tears in them. She bit her lip uncertainly, but nodded. "Okay."

Severus held her hand the whole way to the front door. Once they were inside, it was as if nothing had changed. Mrs. Evans was right there to greet them with hugs and kisses, lavishing her daughter and Severus with her love. Lily was receptive to her mum's touch, and she held on tightly to her. Without words, the mother and daughter already had put aside the incident from three days earlier.

"I'm glad you could be here, Severus," Mrs. Evans said warmly. "Dinner will be ready shortly."

Lily and Severus went into the sitting room to wait. Under the tree was a silver and gold box, which Lily passed to Severus.

"Open it," Lily instructed him.

Severus pulled the paper away and found wrapped a picture album. He ran his fingers over the cover, then opened it, seeing the picture Lily had found at the bottom of the Christmas box a few days ago. Every page he turned contained pictures from their youth, and Severus touched them almost reverently, memories flooding his mind from long ago.

"Lily, this is... Thank you." Moved, Severus closed the album and crossed the short distance between them to kiss her. "This is the best present anyone has ever gotten me."

Lily blushed at his words. "You gave me this ring," she said, holding her hand in front of them. "I couldn't not get you something."

Severus gave her a squeeze, and then Mrs. Evans came into the room to announce dinner. Dinner started off awkwardly the moment Petunia entered the room. Severus noticed the discomfort between the two sisters, and neither made any attempt to start conversation with the other. Lily's parents initiated most of the discussion around the table. Severus told them briefly about the visit with his father, but thought it inappropriate to retell any of the jokes his father knew.

Lily, however, found herself bragging about what a good joke teller Tobias had been. When Mr. Evans inquired after said jokes, Severus gave Lily a wary look, but she simply smiled and giggled.

"I didn't say the jokes were clean," Lily said.

"Indeed," Mr. Evans quipped. "If I ever happen to meet him, I will have to remember a few of my jokes."

"Dad, your jokes are awful," Lily groused.

Mr. Evans chuckled, joined by Mrs. Evans. Only Petunia remained stony-faced. Seeing this, Lily quickly sobered and cleared her throat, resuming eating the goose. The meal passed evenly, and in fact, the rest of the evening wasn't anywhere near as terrible as Lily had been imagining.

At the end of the day, Severus and Lily found themselves once again on her doorstep. Some snow had begun to fall softly.

"Thanks for helping me through things," Lily was saying.

"Anytime," Severus replied.

"I'm still not sure about Petunia." Lily looked at the snow gathering on the fencing around the porch.

"Give it some time," Severus murmured.

"Two days," Lily said. "That's when Mum's surgery is scheduled."

Severus took the change of subject as a hint not to pursue discussing Petunia. "I'll be there."

"You, Sev, will always be there."

"Yes, I will." He leaned in and kissed her fully on the lips. Taking Lily's small hands, he placed them over his heart, adding, "And you are right here. Always."

"Always," Lily echoed.

Author's Note: Whew! That turned into a long chapter! There was so much I wanted to write and didn't even get to it all, so expect another chapter really soon. Since there are a couple of feet of snow on the ground here, I won't be going anywhere tomorrow. In fact, I stayed home all day today, thus giving me the time to write this. As you may have guessed, the next chapter is about Mrs. Evans's surgery and what happens after that. I think we'll be returning to Hogwarts in the chapter after that.

Chapter Sixty-Six

The day after Christmas was uneventful and was filled with growing anticipation in the Evans household as the hour of Mrs. Evans's surgery came nearer. While Lily had found solace with her parents since her argument with Petunia four days earlier, she still hadn't reconciled with Petunia. Petunia spent most of the day holed up in her room, and Lily wasn't about to knock on the door again. She knew what would ensue, and she had no inclination or desire for a repeat of the events from December 22.

Instead, Lily escaped to Severus's house for most of the day. The sun was out again, and with the temperature above freezing, it was comfortable enough to take a walk. They wound up at the park, a place full of memories for the pair, and since the snow had mostly melted, they were able to sit on two of the swings and talk.

Staring at the muddy ground, Lily dug her boot into the sludge beneath her and mumbled, "I never imagined something like this happening to my mum... to my family. I guess it's the old 'you never think something bad will happen to you until it does' thing."

Severus examined the chain he was holding onto, then looked at Lily. Her hair was falling forward, obscuring her face. "That's true," Severus conceded. "Of course, no one ever thinks anything bad will actually happen to them, but just because it's happening doesn't mean it's a matter of fault, Lily. I hope you realize that."

Lily's gloved hands clutched the chains more tightly. She sighed and her shoulders dropped. "It doesn't feel like that right now," she whispered. "This may sound crazy, Sev, but... I took things for granted for so long. I was always used to having things my way. Growing up in a house like mine, I wasn't lacking for anything. I feel like fate is somehow getting its revenge, and there's nothing I can do."

Severus heard her voice crack and knew she was crying. "Hey," he said gently, leaning toward her and pushing her hair back behind her ear. "Lily, it doesn't sound crazy. It's normal to feel that way, but you must believe me."

Severus knew from his experiences what he was talking about. His existence had been one awful event after another, stringing together into this joke called life, but he didn't feel that way anymore. Had Lily come to him with her concerns over her current predicament two or more years ago, Severus wouldn't have held the optimism and faith he now possessed.

Lily brushed the tears away from her face and sat up on the swing. "God, I hope you're right, Sev. If Mum dies tomorrow..."

"Shhh," Severus murmured. "Let's go back inside. It's getting colder."

Severus and Lily stood, and he put a protective arm around her, leading her back to his house.

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December 27 arrived. Very early that morning, a couple of hours before the sun would rise, Severus went to Lily's house. He would be riding with them to the hospital.

The atmosphere was surreal inside. Lily's parents were quiet and only spoke to each other in hushed voices. Petunia hadn't yet come downstairs, and Lily greeted Severus with a drawn look on her face, leading him back to the kitchen, where she offered him coffee.

"I already had some, but thanks," Severus said.

"Did you have breakfast?" she asked.

"A bit."

"There are still some eggs left. I couldn't eat," Lily explained, her voice hollow. She went toward the pan on the stove and picked it up. "Would you like some?"

"That's all right."

Lily shrugged and placed the pan back down. "I guess I'd better leave them out in case Petunia is hungry. Dad didn't eat much, either. Mum can't eat because... well, you know."

Severus nodded. Yes, he knew. No one wanted to utter the word "surgery," it seemed. Not saying it wouldn't change what was about to happen in a few hours.

Then, Mr. Evans came into the kitchen, saying, "It's time we get going." His usual smiling face was absent.

Severus and Lily left the kitchen without a word, not bothering to put the eggs away. Once they were outside, Petunia was standing in the driveway, staring out into the street. Mr. Evans pulled the car out of the garage, and Lily saw that her mum was already in the passenger seat. Petunia gave Severus and Lily a half-hearted glare as they made their way toward the car. Petunia rushed to the other side and entered, and Lily frowned, clearly not wanting to sit next to her sister. Severus didn't press the matter, and so, he obligingly sat in the middle of the back seat, uncomfortably smashed between Petunia and Lily.

The drive started out silent. Mr. Evans flicked the radio on to hear the morning BBC news, but after a minute, he switched it off again. Five minutes later, the radio was back on, only tuned to some music. Severus listened as Bob Dylan sang away morosely, but he didn't know the song. Before another minute passed, the radio was off again.

"It shouldn't take long to get there," Mr. Evans finally stated. "Traffic is light right after the holiday."

No one had anything to add to this observation, so he continued to drive into downtown Manchester. At some point, rain began to fall, and Severus felt it entirely convenient that the weather agree with the thick feeling of depression in the car.

They finally pulled into the parking lot at Manchester General Hospital. The rain was falling harder, and no one had an umbrella, so they walked through the puddles and were soaked in the process, from above and below. Upon entering the doors, Severus felt himself shivering, wishing he could pull out his wand and cast a Drying Charm, but in a Muggle hospital, that would be risky.

Lily and Severus found seats in the waiting room, and Petunia sat on the opposite side, picking up a magazine and flipping through it. Mr. and Mrs. Evans approached the desk to check in.

"Today is going to last forever," Lily murmured.

Severus placed a hand on her arm. "It's better to be here than at home, though. I know it's going to be hard, but we'll get through it."

"And my mum? People sometimes die during surgery," she whispered fearfully, casting a worried glance at her mother.

Petunia frowned at them, probably for whispering, and looked briefly at her parents' backs. She then buried her nose in the magazine again.

"That's highly unlikely to happen," Severus replied just as quietly. "Don't worry prematurely, Lily." He tried to be as reassuring and gentle as possible.

They lapsed into silence, and then Lily's parents withdrew from the check in area, returning to the lobby.

"I'm going with your mother back to the area where she's to get changed," Mr. Evans explained. "After that, I'll be back out to wait with you. If there's something you want to say, now is the time." His voice was no longer as steady as it had been in the car.

Lily stood, going to her mum. Severus watched as she whispered something into her mum's ear, and they hugged tightly, Lily releasing a small sob in the process. Petunia stood off to the side, apprehension on her face and apparent melancholy in her eyes. When Lily released her mother, she stepped to the side to allow Petunia a moment with her mother. Severus looked away, wondering if he ought to say something, but he felt anything he said wouldn't help. When Petunia and Mrs. Evans refrained from embracing, Petunia quickly strode to the seat she had been occupying, not looking at anyone else.

Severus and Mrs. Evans then met eyes, and he offered her a timid smile. Finding his resolve, he found himself walking across the

waiting room, and with Lily still standing there to witness the exchange, he placed his arms around the woman who had become like a mother to him. Mrs. Evans returned the hug with fervor.

"Thank you, Severus," she simply said.

Severus didn't trust himself to speak, so he simply nodded fiercely. Finally, he ground out, "You'll be all right."

When he released her, he could see tears in her eyes, but she was smiling. "All right, then," she sighed, trying to keep her voice hopeful. "I'll see you all in a few hours. I love you."

Mr. Evans wrapped an arm around his wife and lead her away, leaving Lily and Severus alone, save the stubborn Petunia in the corner. Once her parents were gone, Lily allowed herself to break down. She had been holding it in, trying to be strong in front of her mother. Severus kept a hand on her back and the other one clutching hers in her lap. Not too far away, Petunia overheard Lily's sobs and briefly lowered the magazine to watch.

Neither Lily nor Severus saw the tears brimming over her lower eyelids.

Some time later, Mr. Evans returned. He glanced expectantly from Petunia to Lily and Severus, saying, "Well, she's getting prepped for the surgery. The procedure is usually about two to three hours, and then it will be a few more hours before we can see her. Perhaps we ought to head to the cafeteria to get something to eat?"

Severus's stomach growled. He had eaten a minimal breakfast, and he was hungry. With Lily and Petunia not eating anything, he imagined they would be starving. Lily gave a small sigh and gave in. Petunia finally set the magazine down and stood, following the others down the hall to the cafeteria.

Breakfast was still being served, and even though Mr. Evans ordered plenty of food, everyone picked at it. Conversation was stilted. Returning to the waiting room, the four of them knew it would be a long day indeed. Despite trying to discuss other things, Violet Evans

was on everyone's mind, and at this point, no one dared ask any questions, for fear their worst thoughts might come true.

When they grew tired of sitting, Lily and Severus would take short walks through the hallways, but being in the hospital was unnerving. Seeing patients in gowns, too vulnerable and afraid, being pushed on gurneys and doctors and nurses in their white, clinical uniforms was unsettling.

Lunch was another bleak affair, and the food lacked much flavor. Severus wasn't sure if this was because of anxiety or because it was hospital food, which Lily told him tasted horrible. They sat by themselves in the cafeteria this time, as Mr. Evans was off somewhere with Petunia.

"I had to spend a night in the hospital when I was seven," she told him. "Remember when I said I'd had to have my tonsils out?"

Severus nodded. The removal of tonsils was apparently a very common procedure in the Muggle world, especially in children, but he wasn't sure why.

"I was only at St. Mungo's for burning my hand when playing with my potions- er, chemistry set," Severus muttered, hoping none of the Muggles nearby heard him. "I was five, I think."

"You never told me that," Lily said curiously.

Taking this as a cue for conversation about something other than Mrs. Evans, Severus pursued it, hoping to keep their minds calm. They exchanged stories of childhood injuries, some of them previously shared and others new.

Shortly after returning to the lobby, a doctor came to tell them the news.

"The mastectomy went smoothly. We removed the entire mass, including some of the sentinel lymph nodes. A biopsy will be performed. She is still out, but in a couple of hours, if she is stable, we will place her in a stepdown unit, and you will be able to visit for a few minutes."

"Thank you," Mr. Evans told the doctor, who gave a nod and retreated.

Lily released a relieved sigh. Severus felt her body relax under his touch and felt his own body relax as well. The surgery was over, and hopefully it had been successful.

As the afternoon passed, conversation died. Everyone was anxious to see Mrs. Evans, making it impossible to talk about anything else. Finally, the doctor returned and said they would be allowed to visit.

Mr. Evans was the first to stand. He led the others to the room where his wife was recovering. Mrs. Evans's eyes travelled to the door, watching her family and Severus enter. Her mouth twitched a little on both sides into a small smile.

"Hello," she rasped. The bed was inclined enough for her to see her guests properly, but it would be some time before she could be sitting up.

Going to her side, Mr. Evans leaned down and kissed her. He ran his fingers through her hair tenderly. "How are you feeling, Vi?"

"Fine, all things considered," Mrs. Evans said weakly.

Lily was next. She smiled and said in a teary voice, "Hi, Mum."

"Lily, darling," Mrs. Evans replied, lifting her hand a bit from the bed. Lily took it and held it.

Severus came to stand just behind Lily and watched in silence. Petunia, however, seemed afraid to approach the bed.

"Petunia, honey, come here," Mrs. Evans said.

Petunia eyed her mum warily, but stepped farther into the room and finally came to stand on the other side. She hesitantly reached for her mum's other hand, careful not to hurt her.

"I'm glad you're okay, Mum," Lily said shakily.

"See? I told you not to worry," Mrs. Evans said gently. She winced, causing alarm in her daughters, but shaking her head, she continued, "It's nothing. The usual pain associated with the surgery. The doctor said to expect it for the next couple of days. I'll have to wear drains for a couple of weeks, too."

"When can you come home?" Lily asked.

"I'll be home in time for the New Year."

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Mrs. Evans came home on New Year's Eve. The biopsy revealed that she had indeed had breast cancer, and some of the cancer had spread to her lymph nodes nearby, so she was scheduled to return for a second surgery to remove more of the sentinel lymph nodes in another month. The news wasn't what the Evans family had hoped to hear.

Lily found she couldn't be as strong as she felt she needed to be. Whenever she was alone, which she hated being, she spent hours crying in her room. Petunia still wouldn't speak to her, and every glare from her older sister was like a stab to the heart. Lily regretted her insensitivity toward Petunia on that first day back all the more, but nothing she could say would change things... or so she felt.

While Lily and the rest of her family were glad to have Mrs. Evans back home, they knew it was only a matter of time before the next surgery... and possibly further bad news. Then the chemotherapy was likely to start, ensuring a long, difficult road for all of them, especially Violet Evans.

Mrs. Evans, for her part, kept her resolve. Her spirits were high, and even though she succumbed to moments of weakness, she was the glue that held her family together.

On New Year's Eve, Lily went to Severus's house. Severus and she had argued over whose house they ought to be at for the New Year earlier that day. Severus had hoped Lily would want to be with her family, but he wouldn't push her. He feared the wedge between Petunia and her could do more damage.

As the hour neared midnight, Severus and Lily sat on the old, threadbare couch in the sitting room of Spinner's End. A low fire crackled in the grate.

"Do you think next year will bring good with it?" Lily posed, watching the second hand move on the clock above the mantle.

"I should hope so," Severus replied. "We will be graduating from Hogwarts... starting lives outside of school."

"1978..." Lily murmured. "I just hope Mum recovers."

Severus grasped her hand tightly, locking hope between their palms. The minute hand drew nearer to the twelve on the clock. The fire died down, the old year winding down, leaving embers in its wake, yet glowing, giving warmth for hearts such as these two young lovers.

The clock struck midnight.

Severus kissed Lily with the slightest brush of the lips, and despite the silent tear travelling down her cheek, Lily could have sworn she just felt Severus's heart beating in her chest.

Author's Note: I realize that writing about a real life subject like cancer is a sensitive topic for most people, but I felt like this was something I wanted to address. Everyone knows someone who has had cancer. My job in the real world (yes, I don't always spend my time writing) is in researching a cure for kidney cancer. I work at a hospital, where I see the sadness and worry, but also the hope, on people's faces. Cancer killed three of my grandparents, one being my grandmother who I was very close to, and that was 13 years ago. So, I understand how much it hurts to deal with a loved one who is going through cancer.

I have also witnessed so many strong, faithful people who have had cancer, whether they survived or not. I do not think it is so much whether someone lives or dies, but how they lived their life that matters. It is, perhaps, most painful for those left behind. I believe in God and in heaven, and I believe in the power of prayer. I believe that people who have cancer (or other illnesses) are healed in some way, although maybe not always the way we expected.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

A few days after the New Year, Severus and Lily returned to Hogwarts, much to Lily's dismay. She had had a difficult time leaving her family, knowing what would be ensuing in the weeks ahead. Promising to return home for her mum's surgery at the end of the month, Lily was at least glad she would be able to see her mum fairly soon, despite the circumstances.

Not long after their return, the daily routine of classes became habit once again. On Severus's eighteenth birthday, Lily was hoping to spend time with Severus in the evening, but she received a note during dinner that would change her plans. Curious as to who could have written to her, Lily opened the letter and found a message from Dumbledore, asking her to come to his office that evening.

She looked toward the Head Table, seeing the headmaster sitting in the middle, but he was in deep conversation with Professor McGonagall. Frowning, Lily folded the note and resumed eating.

"What's that you've got there?" James suddenly asked.

"That's not really your business," Lily replied coolly, trying to keep her composure calm.

James wrapped an arm around Mary and grinned. "Aw, touchy, aren't we, Lily?"

Lily glared at him, and James held his hands up in mock surrender. "Hey, hey, what's got your knickers in a twist?"

"James," Mary admonished, rolling her eyes at her boyfriend and huffing. Turning to Lily, she said, "Don't mind him, Lily. Sorry about that."

"Don't worry about it," Lily mumbled.

She finished eating dinner as quickly as she could, anxious to find out what Dumbledore wanted. In all her time at Hogwarts, she had never been called to the headmaster's office for a private audience. Before heading out of the Great Hall, Lily stopped by the Slytherin table.

Finding Severus, she said, "Happy birthday, Sev."

"Thanks, Lily," he replied. "Are we still on for tonight?"

Lily bit her lip. "Actually, besides wishing you a happy birthday, that's why I came over here." She leaned down and whispered into his ear, "I just got a summons from the headmaster. He wants to see me in his office."

Severus cast her a quizzical look. "Why?"

Shrugging, Lily murmured, "I don't know. I guess I'll find out in fifteen minutes. I've got to go, Sev. I'm sorry." With a peck on the cheek, Lily left a bewildered Severus sitting there.

Lily proceeded out of the Great Hall, noticing that Dumbledore had already left, and toward the headmaster's office. She gave the appropriate password, stepped onto the revolving staircase, and soon found herself facing the oaken door. She knocked a couple of times.

The door was beckoned open by Dumbledore's wave of the hand. He smiled genially at her.

"Ah, Miss Evans... Lily, thank you for coming on such short notice," Dumbledore greeted her. "Do come in and make yourself at home."

Lily, aware of the headmaster's overly-rehearsed greetings from Severus, entered the office and took the seat in front of the desk. "Good evening, sir," she stated politely. "What is it you wanted to discuss?"

"Lily, I know of your mother's condition. I am so very sorry. I wanted to start by asking: How are you holding up?" Dumbledore posed sincerely.

"I'm okay," Lily replied, but her brow creased in confusion. "But, sir, how did you know about my mum?"

"Ah, that," Dumbledore said lightly. "That is easily explained. Just because you had left Hogwarts doesn't mean you are unprotected and forgotten, especially Muggle families such as yours, Lily. With the

looming war going on, I have done what I can to help protect my students and their families. It was observed that your family made a trip to the Muggle hospital in Manchester on the 27th of December. While I don't know what procedure your mother had done, I do know this much. How is she?"

Lily was touched by the headmaster's concern and the fact that he looked out for his students, even when they weren't at school. She had honestly had no idea. While she knew he was active in the Ministry and against what Voldemort stood for, Lily had yet to understand just how deeply involved Dumbledore was with the affairs of the wizarding world.

"She's doing all right, all things considered. Her spirit is strong, but she has to return for another surgery at the end of the month. She... she had.. has breast cancer, sir," Lily explained, her voice becoming strained at the end.

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "You will, of course, be permitted to return home for a few days for her surgery, then. Family is important. The neglect of family can tear it apart, and that is a tragic and terrible thing."

Lily saw Dumbledore's eyes take on a faraway, sad quality as he spoke of families, and she wondered if he spoke in such a way because of his own family. She wished to ask, but thought it inappropriate, seeing as he was her professor. Lily didn't know anything of Dumbledore's personal matters, so unless he chose to share them, she kept quiet.

"Yes, I agree," was all Lily said, wondering if this was why he had called her to his office, but based on what Severus had told her about the old man, he had hidden motives, so she awaited something more.

Lily wasn't surprised when Dumbledore proceeded to do just that.

"Lily, I must ask you," Dumbledore said, his tone becoming more serious, "how is Severus?"

"Severus?" Lily echoed, suspicious and perplexed. "He's fine, sir. Why?"

"I have no doubt that he is well in terms that you and he are very close. He has certainly come a long way in his time at Hogwarts and mastered many skills. Lily, I wonder... Was there ever a time in your combined history at Hogwarts when you noticed a sudden change in him?"

"Sir, why are you asking me this?" Lily questioned. "I mean, not to be rude or anything, but why not ask Severus himself? And do you not think that I won't talk to him later about our conversation? He already knows you have summoned me here."

"You may feel free to share the contents of our conversation with Severus," Dumbledore said mildly. "You are very good friends, so there is no doubt you would want to talk with him about this. I am simply concerned for him, Lily, and I have tried asking him. I have spoken with him, but he doesn't want to open up. He knows I am concerned, but I do not think he views it that way. Unfortunately, Severus doesn't trust me, although I cannot figure out why that would be the case."

Lily nodded. "Well, I was worried about him for a while, but that was nearly two or more years ago. I thought he was hanging around with the wrong crowd and tried to tell him repeatedly to stop being friends with people like Mulciber. He did stop at the end of fifth year... and he made that big stance against You-Know-Who last year. You know all this, though, sir. Severus has been adamant about doing what's right, just like I always know he would. I admit - I had my doubts at times in fourth and fifth year, but the boy I met before Hogwarts was a good person and still is a good person, Professor."

Dumbledore listened intently to Lily's explanation of Severus's behavior, but he knew she had the bias of being a close friend, so she would defend him. He probed further, "And what of his abilities?"

"Like the flying?" Lily asked. "I just assumed... Well, he said he'd been practicing in his spare time. He *is* very intelligent, sir."

"I realize Severus is very intelligent, yes," Dumbledore replied. He thought Severus's abilities far exceeded that of any stellar seventh year, although he didn't vocalize this to Lily. He kept that information to himself. Lily apparently didn't know about the Occlumency.

Lily couldn't help but frown. She could tell Dumbledore wasn't being entirely open and honest with her, and thinking of Severus's distrust in the headmaster, she felt herself closing up. Had Dumbledore really only asked her here to discuss Severus, not out of concern for her family? Feeling slightly betrayed and hurt, Lily asked, "May I go now, sir?"

"You're upset," Dumbledore stated.

"No, I'm fine," Lily protested.

"It wasn't my intention to make you feel used, Lily," Dumbledore tried to explain, that gentle voice returning.

For a moment, Lily was almost taken in, but being around Severus had made her more on her guard. She wasn't to be fooled, whether Dumbledore was genuine or not. "Please, sir, may I please go?" she almost pleaded, wishing she didn't sound so vulnerable.

"You may. Good night, Lily."

"Good night," Lily said in a rushed voice. She stood and exited the office, hating herself for being such an open book.

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The following day, Lily found Severus in the library after classes were over.

"You wouldn't believe the nerve of Dumbledore," Lily hissed, sitting down across from Severus.

"Actually, I would," Severus pointed out dryly. "Why? What did he say?"

"First of all, he knew I would tell you, anyway, so I don't think he told me anything he didn't want getting back to you. He started off by inquiring about my mum, explaining that he ensures protection of the students' families. I thought that was a kind thing to do, but then he asked about you, asking if I'd seen any major changes in you. He said you refused to open up to him."

Severus scowled. "How much more intrusive must he get?" he questioned, annoyed. "It's bad enough that he bothers me; now he's trying to drag you into the mix. What did you tell him?"

"Nothing he doesn't already know, not that there's anything to really say. I told him I'd been worried about you for a couple of years until you stopped being friends with certain bad influences and that you now opposed You-Know-Who. He then proceeded to question in regards to your abilities, thinking it suspicious that you could fly, for example. That's ridiculous. You're just really good at what you do."

Severus inwardly cringed. He hadn't told Lily about the Occlumency, and despite the duelling clubs, she hadn't seen him at his best in combat. There was so much Lily didn't know, but telling her was not an option, he felt. Those past memories needed to remain a secret. His shame of his past life's decisions had to stay deeply buried, almost to the point he could forget that existence.

"Well, he isn't going to get anything out of either of us, then," Severus stated.

"Why is he so interested in you, anyway?" Lily asked. "I mean, I know you chose to change what Slytherin stood for, what you stood for, but people can change their minds. Granted, it's hard and takes a strong person to do that, but you'd think Dumbledore would be happy you're on his side."

Lily's choice of words caused Severus anguish. "I'm not on 'his side,' per se," he tried to explain. "Why must the division simply be Dumbledore versus You-Know-Who? People have a right to take their own stance."

"Of course," Lily said, a bit put off by Severus's reaction, "but if you're good, and Dumbledore's good, then you're both basically on the same side."

"More or less, but I don't like it being called 'Dumbledore's side.' It's not as if Dumbledore is the know-all, say-all of what's good and right."

"But a lot of people look up to him," Lily said, "although I have to wonder if they realize he may be using them. I felt what you felt in his

presence, but until you had brought it to my attention, I don't think I would have realized it."

Glad Lily had at least seen the light where Dumbledore's intricate, tiny manipulations were concerned, Severus conceded, "I hope you don't have to talk to him one-on-one again. It isn't pleasant, for all he tries to make it otherwise."

Lily sighed. "Enough about Dumbledore. N.E.W.T.s are coming, Sev, so we ought to study."

Severus gave an exasperated sigh. His mind wasn't on studying, but the reality of the war, both outside and inside the castle. Now that he was back at Hogwarts, everything regarding the war returned face-to-face.

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Duelling sessions were resumed a little more than a week after returning to Hogwarts. Since finding out from Lily about Dumbledore, Severus felt all the more annoyed, hoping the headmaster would relent, but that wish was about as possible as Voldemort becoming good. With the mounting tensions in Slytherin, Severus was placed even more on edge, so he hoped to direct it toward training others effectively during the duelling club tonight.

Students seemed excited to be back, ready for the next round of training. Having already mastered Stunning, Disarming, and a plethora of other useful spells, Severus felt it was time to move to the next level: nonverbally casting of the spells. He realized this was asking a lot from the younger students, but to him, a person should always be ready and willing to learn new techniques.

"We will be learning nonverbal spells," Severus explained, not bothering to welcome the students.

"Nonverbal spells?" James asked loudly.

"Isn't that a little advanced for most of the kids here?" Sirius posed.

Taking their questions as criticism, Severus snapped, "If it's too much for you to handle, the door is right there. I am the one running this class, so therefore I shall decide what is and is not feasible."

"Class?" Lily asked softly. "Sev, this isn't a class. You're teaching us, but it's our choice to be here."

Severus realized he had spoken like the professor he used to be, and he mentally chided himself, which only fuelled his irritation. He was unpleasantly surprised by Lily's comment, but forced himself to remain calm.

"All right," Severus said. "We will begin trying to learn nonverbal spells, but it would be best of third years and younger stayed in one group and the older students in another. Lily, why don't you work with the younger ones?"

You're bound to be more understanding and patient, he thought.

"Okay," Lily said hesitantly.

She rallied the younger students to follow her, so Severus was left with the others.

"Okay, you know the drill. Find a partner," Severus said lazily.

Inevitably, James and Sirius decided to work together. Severus knew if he said anything, he would only upset himself further, so he chose to keep his mouth shut.

"Those who are in sixth year or above should know how this works, but it's still challenging. I suggest you close your eyes and imagine what spell you wish to cast and how you feel doing it and how it will effect your opponent."

Severus felt he was giving a lot more explanation than he would have in the past. His nerves eased some as he proceeded to explain. Finally, he instructed, "All right, now. Attack your opponent, and the opponent will try to block. Do this nonverbally, and if you can't, then just trying blocking nonverbally. That's usually easier."

The students began. It was a disaster, and Severus cringed at the poor attempts he was seeing. James and Sirius, being adept at Defense, were making nonverbal casting look like child's play.

Approaching the duo, Severus stated, "Showing off, are you?"

"No," James replied nonchalantly. "We just know what we're doing."

"Piece of cake," Sirius added.

"Indeed," Severus sneered. "Well, perhaps you would be so *considerate* as to split up your esteemed partnership and work with others? You know, actually help them?"

"You seem to be doing a fine job of helping them, Snape," James said, smirking.

"Don't patronize me," Severus snapped.

"Whoa, touchy," James replied in mock hurt. Sirius laughed.

"Then why are you two here, if not to cause trouble?" Severus inquired harshly. "These sessions are important. You're making it a joke, and I'm sure it's upsetting to others who aren't as advanced as you."

"Hey, no need to get so uptight, Snape," James said, holding up his hands in surrender. "You ought to learn to lighten up."

"Lighten up?" Severus asked, aghast. "In case you haven't noticed, Potter, there's a bloody war going on. In a few months, we'll be graduated and out in the world. Or have you forgotten that you lost a friend already?"

The smile on James's face evaporated. Sirius was glaring at Severus. Several of the students around them had stopped working. A little beyond, the group Lily was helping also noticed the lack of movement and sound, and they stopped practicing as well. Lily gazed at Severus, James, and Sirius, ready to intervene if necessary.

"I haven't forgotten," James growled.

"You dare bring up Peter-" Sirius started to say.

"James, Sirius, calm down," Remus suddenly said, stepping in between Severus and his friends. "Severus wasn't being disrespectful of Peter. Were you, Severus?"

"No," Severus said curtly. All eyes were on him, and feeling the discomfort growing, Severus barked, "The session is over."

"Severus-" Lily started to say.

Shaking his head, Severus held up his hand. "No, Lily, not now," he muttered.

The students exchanged glances and slowly began to exit the classroom. Severus could hear the Marauders mumbling and grousing among themselves, and it took every ounce of self-control he possessed not to yell at them. Once Lily and Severus were alone, Severus sighed and sank to the floor, burying his face in his hands, groaning.

"Severus," Lily said softly, concerned and put out. She sat down next to him and placed a hand on his back.

"I'm so... tired," he whispered at the floor.

"Of what?" Lily asked.

"Of Dumbledore, of Potter and his friends, of trying to help and not getting anywhere, of having to keep peace in Slytherin, of... of..." Severus trailed off, his breathing fast and shallow.

Lily hadn't seen him in this state in a long time, and it worried her. "Sev," she said gently, "of course you're tired. You've done so much, even been there for me through this whole thing with my mum and family."

"I wanted to be there for you, Lily," Severus blurted, looking up into her face. "I didn't mean-"

"I know you didn't mean it was a burden for you," Lily told him mildly. She took his face in her hands, slowly caressing his cheeks.

Severus allowed himself a small smile. "Thank you," he simply said. "I don't know why I lost it like that."

"You've been through a lot. It's no wonder you're exhausted... physically, mentally, emotionally. You deserve a break. Maybe we shouldn't have the duelling session next week," Lily suggested.

"No, I don't want to do that," Severus countered. "It's important for them to learn how to effectively duel. Just because I'm having a hard time of things lately, that doesn't excuse me."

"At least think about it?" Lily asked.

"Okay."

Leaning in, Lily pressed her lips tenderly to his, and Severus returned the kiss with passion and fervor. He brought his hands to either side of her face and held her lips to his, drinking in her sweetness and vitality.

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As January progressed, however, the level of stress Severus was experiencing only increased. The amount of energy it took to keep avoiding Dumbledore alone was draining. Even though there was progress slowly being made in the duelling sessions, Severus was still on edge every time they met. To make matters worse, Roger Mulciber must have made it his New Year's resolution to cause even more trouble. Detention and removal of house points didn't seem to faze him any longer.

Not wishing to seek Dumbledore's help, and Slughorn would be of little service, Severus appealed to talking with the Slytherin prefects. They met in one of the classrooms one evening. He realized he should have done so sooner, but it was difficult to know who to trust. Regulus was one of the prefects, and Severus still didn't know whose side he was on.

"We all need to work together to keep order in our house," Severus told the group. "I don't know if some of you agree with what Mulciber is doing, but if you do, I'm telling you right now that it's not going to stand. The lot of you do next to nothing to ensure peace in the common room and elsewhere, and I don't know if it's because you're afraid to speak up or because you think it's perfectly all right to harrass others."

"It's not that horrible," Regulus said. "We award Slytherin points when they deserve it, and that's because the other houses are always trying to give us a bad name."

"Not that horrible?" Severus inquired. "Have you been sticking your head in the sand, Black?"

Regulus scowled at Severus. "A few unruly students is nothing to get so worked up over."

"This is more than that," Severus argued. "Do you forget what happened in Hogsmeade two months ago?"

"No one who's still a student here was responsible for Pettigrew's death," the fifth year girl prefect, named Wilma Bulstrode, stated stiffly.

"Perhaps not directly, but I know for a fact that there are students who are supporters of You-Know-Who," Severus said, "and they are the ones giving Slytherin a bad name. If you want to appear noble, then do something about the problem."

"You sound like a Gryffindor," Dennis Masterson, the fifth year boy prefect, stated distastefully.

"This has nothing to do with houses," Severus tried to point out. "Slytherin can be just as noble as any other house."

"By supporting Mudbloods?" Masterson asked snidely.

Severus felt his blood boil. He stood and grabbed the younger boy by the collar. "Well, Masterson, you have just made your stance clear.

Get out of my sight. You are not worthy of doing what's truly right, so I shall know better now than to enlist in your support."

Masterson brought his hands, balled into fists, between them, roughly cutting off Severus's grasp on him. "You're a disgrace, Snape," he hissed, turning on his heel and leaving.

"Is there anyone else who agrees with him?" Severus demanded.

No one said anything, but not convinced, Severus said shortly, "Very well. This little meeting is over. I should hope I haven't been wasting my time."

Severus returned to his room and dropped onto the bed, feeling a headache coming on. He reached into the bedside table's drawer and extracted a small vial. He downed its contents to alleviate the headache, throwing the vial to the ground in frustration, and flopped back onto the bed.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Severus's headache didn't feel any better in the morning, despite the Dreamless Sleep Potion he had taken. His headache was just the beginning of the migraine it would turn into in the following days. Two days later, Lily left Hogwarts to return home to be with her family. As much as Severus wished he could go with her, the permission hadn't been granted by Slughorn or McGonagall, and Severus certainly wasn't going to go begging to Dumbledore.

He resigned himself to teaching another duelling session that Monday in Lily's absence, and by the end of the hour, wondered what could have possibly possessed him to torture himself with such masochism. Feeling bone-weary, Severus knew he would need to check in on the Slytherin common room before retiring for the night. Unfortunately, it had become a daily routine to make multiple trips to said common room, as only two of the six prefects were actually doing anything to keep the peace, and even that wasn't much.

Before going to the hell hole, though, Severus decided a hot shower would help take off the edge. Thankful for his own bathroom, Severus allowed himself twenty minutes to indulge in the comfort of the warm, relaxing spray and the privacy and quiet found only in his own chambers.

After finishing his shower, Severus changed into some comfortable clothes and went for the door. Gazing one last time at his room before heading out, he released a long sigh and shook his head.

Turning the knob, he thought, *Best to just get this other with.*

Severus proceeded down the corridor, taking a few turns, and coming to the stairs. He took them at a slower than usual pace, not desiring to make his nightly call in the common room. He thought Slughorn to be a horrible head of house. The man should have been doing this, not him. Slughorn, of course, was simply too wrapped up in his over-glorified Slug Club and in students from all houses whom he thought worthy of his attention.

I may not have been popular with the other houses when I was a teacher, but at least my house respected me. I was a better head of house than Slughorn ever was, Severus thought bitterly.

Slughorn, after all, had been head of Slytherin way back when Tom Riddle had been a student, and he had been just as taken with the boy's charm as many others.

Severus finally reached his destination. He warily gave the password and entered the Slytherin common room. The sight that was occurring in front of him couldn't have been worse. Well, it could have, but Severus didn't want to think down such a dark path.

Roger Mulciber had his wand out, and it was pointed directly at Rose Clearwater, who was clutching her wand, trembling. From behind Mulciber, a few others had their wands out as well, although not pointed at anyone, but ready to attack at any moment. Emily Porter stood shaking next to her friend, and several more students stood a little way behind the two girls, afraid to act.

Before Severus could intervene, Mulciber shouted, "Incendio!" Flames bursted from his wand and were about to hit poor Rose before she could do anything, but Severus reacted quickly, shouting, "Protego!" and aiming his wand at Rose.

The shield protected Rose from the fiery blast, which exploded upon contact, causing small bits of flame to hit others, sending screams echoing through the room, but luckily the little flames went out immediately and caused no damage.

Suddenly seeing Severus standing there near the doorway, Mulciber turned his attention to him, rage upon his features. The fool tried to aim his wand at Severus, then changed his mind and turned back to Rose. The incantation, "Cruc-", was upon his lips, but Severus flicked his wand, disarming the bastard. Another fluid motion and Mulciber was Stunned.

"Who's next?" Severus challenged Mulciber's group.

With Severus present, others who had been standing in fear momentarily ago behind Rose and Emily were bolstered and raised

their wands at Mulciber's small army. Recovered, Rose joined them in defending what was right.

The Slytherins who had decided to follow their ring leader found themselves at a loss without said leader. Severus noticed Masterson was among the students who was with Mulciber, which didn't surprise him in the least.

"That's what I thought," Severus sneered. "Well, we'll see what the headmaster has to say about this."

Stepping farther into the room, Severus paused, turning to Rose and asking softly, "Are you all right?"

"Yes," she replied. "Thank you, Severus."

Nodding curtly, Severus turned his attention back to Mulciber's group. "Go back to your dormitories. You can clearly see you're outnumbered, so should you be so foolish as to try something like your dunderhead mate here, you'll be joining him. As for him," Severus continued, glaring down at Mulciber's frozen body and kicking him in the shin for good measure, "he's coming with me."

Severus levitated the younger Mulciber toward the door. The troublemakers were busy sending glares toward Severus and many others, but they reluctantly obeyed, for now, and left the common room.

"What happened, anyway?" Severus asked Rose.

"Rose was talking about you and how much she admires what you stand for," Emily explained. "Mulciber overheard it and said something rude."

"I asked him to take it back," Rose shot in, finding her courage. "He didn't, and then he said he was going to teach me a lesson. That's when you walked in."

"Hmm, you had better come with me, Rose," Severus said. "The headmaster needs to know the full details. This has gotten far too out of hand. You do realize he almost used an Unforgivable on you?"

Rose nodded meekly. "Yes," she said in a small voice.

"Come on," Severus stated firmly.

Rose glanced back at Emily as she left the common room, following Severus, who levitated Mulciber's unconscious body out in front of him. They walked down the corridors in silence, every footstep echoing coldly off the stone floor and walls. In five minutes' time, they arrived at the headmaster's office. Severus impatiently barked the password, and the door opened to emit them. Once at the top of the staircase, Severus pounded on the door.

A second later, the door was opened, and Dumbledore gazed upon the sight in front of him.

"My word, Severus," Dumbledore said, taking notice of Mulciber. "What in Merlin's good name has happened?"

"I'll tell you what's happened, Headmaster," Severus replied roughly, releasing Mulciber from the levitation and letting him fall unceremoniously to the floor. "This piece of trash is following in his dear older brother's footsteps. Miss Clearwater can explain further."

Dumbledore frowned at Severus's treatment of Mulciber's body, but then gazed patiently upon Rose. "Very well, Miss Clearwater," the headmaster intoned. "What happened?"

Rose proceeded to explain what she had shared with Severus minutes ago, but didn't mention the attempted use of the Cruciatus Curse.

Dumbledore nodded. "And I trust any further attacks have been prevented?"

"Yes," Severus stated tersely. "Thankfully there are plenty of students in Slytherin who do not agree with Roger Mulciber, and they outnumber the ones who think it's perfectly all right to attack another student. Mulciber nearly employed the Cruciatus Curse on Miss Clearwater. I do think that warrants expulsion."

"That is quite an accusation," Dumbledore pointed out sternly. "And you can confirm this, Miss Clearwater?"

Severus frowned. Apparently Dumbledore didn't take him at his word any longer.

"Of course," Rose stated, surprised as well that Dumbledore didn't seem to believe Severus. "Severus has been wonderful for Slytherin," she asserted. "He protected me."

"All right," Dumbledore acquiesced, just when Severus was about to demand if he needed to retrieve his memory and show it to the disbelieving old wizard.

"You may return to your dormitory, Miss Clearwater, if you are all right," Dumbledore instructed her.

Rose nodded, casting Severus a concerned look, and left the office.

"You may as well take a seat, Severus," Dumbledore said heavily.

Severus continued to stand. "I'm fine how I am."

"Have it your way," Dumbledore sighed. "I suppose I will need to contact the governors about this incident. Never had I imagined a third year boy attacking another student in such a way." He shook his head, seeming very old all of a sudden.

"What did you need me for?" Severus questioned bluntly. "You have Mulciber."

"Yes, yes, I realize that, Severus," Dumbledore stated. "I must speak with you, however. I trust news of my having spoken with Miss Evans got back to you?"

"Yes," Severus ground out, his teeth clenched, wondering why Dumbledore was insisting on tormenting him with incessant questions.

"I am also quite aware that you have been continuing the duelling sessions that you started with Peter Pettigrew a few months ago," Dumbledore said.

Severus groaned. "And?" he queried impatiently.

"You do realize, Severus, that you have been given a lot of freedom to do as you see fit. You organized a student group which has not been approved by any member of the staff. Normally, such behavior would be looked upon as suspicious and out of line. You would be subject to several weeks' worth of detention and the severe removal of house points-"

"Then put me in detention; remove bloody house points," Severus cut in angrily.

Dumbledore held up his hand to still the young man. "No, Severus, I do not wish to do either of those things, for you see, while organizing such a student group would *normally* result in such consequences, I do not believe I can sit here and punish you for doing something that was done with the noblest of intentions."

"How did you know about the sessions continuing?" Severus questioned. "You refused to give me a straight answer last time. I think I deserve to know at least that much."

"Ah, that is simple," Dumbledore explained. "While you may not like it, I had asked a certain student to be my ears and eyes for me."

"Who?" Severus asked, furrowing his brow.

"James Potter."

"What?!" Severus barked. "You're telling me that *Potter* has been your little spy all this time?" Utterly incensed, Severus began pacing the room, wishing he could break some of Dumbledore's trinkets.

"Calm down, Severus," Dumbledore said mildly. "It was merely a precaution I felt needed to be taken. When you first began tutoring Peter Pettigrew, it seemed out of the norm for you. James Potter is... was Peter's friend. I was concerned about you, and while I had good reason to think your intentions were good, I had to be sure."

"I should have never started those stupid meetings in the first place," Severus spat bitterly. "Peter Pettigrew wound up *dead* because of my

intervention. I wouldn't have started them again had I not be asked by others."

"Severus," Dumbledore implored gently, "listen to me. Now, first, I want you to look at me."

Severus refused and kept his eyes stoically planted on the floor. His breathing was shallow and rapid, and with every breath, he felt his walls crumbling. He was so worn out... so very tired. His shoulders slumped in defeat.

"Please don't try to probe my mind," Severus almost whispered. "At least grant me some dignity."

"I will not invade your mind, Severus," Dumbledore said. "I promise."

So wary of fighting Dumbledore any longer, Severus caved and lifted his eyes. Black met blue, and as Dumbledore said he would, he didn't try to employ Legilimency upon Severus.

"Good," Dumbledore murmured delicately. "Severus, I am sorry if I have done anything to hurt you. I should have paid more attention to you in your younger years and listened when you said Sirius Black meant you real harm two years ago. I admit my shortcomings to you. I am sorry, Severus. I am so glad you have had Lily Evans in your life, though. You have done a miraculous thing in turning your life around. It's just that... your change seemed so abrupt. That was what concerned me, and while I still don't know how you have managed feats such as Occlumency and flying, I do know that you are a good person. I believe you ought to keep the duelling club going. You are giving these students more to hope for than I ever could. My role in this war has been for the greater good, and that is a cold position to take. I see everything from a distance, but not you, Severus. You see people closely, and this war is a very personal matter to you. That much I can tell without having to even ask."

A part of Severus wanted to fight the words he was hearing from Dumbledore, but the larger part of him felt exposed and vulnerable. His thoughts from a few weeks ago of trying to intimidate Dumbledore or prove himself somehow better than the aged wizard dissipated. He thought of Lily's mother, who might be dying, and of Lily being with

her family at this very moment. Life was too precious to be wasted on vengeance and bitterness. He had done too much of that in his past existence. That didn't mean he would be foolish and give his trust openly, but Severus believed Dumbledore's words to be sincere.

"All right," Severus said softly. "Apology accepted."

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On February 1, Lily returned to Hogwarts. Ever since Severus's talk with Dumbledore, things had run more smoothly in the Slytherin common room. Roger Mulciber had been expelled for attempting to use the Cruciatus Curse on another student, which seemed to cow the others who were in his camp for the time being. Knowing it was only a matter of time before problems arose again, Severus revelled in the days of peace he currently had. Seeing Lily again would be welcoming, but he worried what news she would bring of her mother.

That evening, with nowhere else private to go, the two went to their broom closet.

"I'm glad you're back," Severus said, hugging her. He didn't let go right away, just in case she needed his support.

Lily sighed into his chest. "I'm happy to see you, too, Sev, but... it was hard to leave home. I feel so guilty coming back to school, knowing that Mum is going to be starting chemo soon, and I won't be there."

Giving her a squeeze, Severus murmured, "I know." He kissed the top of her head and smoothed her hair. "I trust the surgery went well?"

"Yes, the good news is that they think they got all the cancer, but they're doing the chemo to be sure. Next time I see Mum, it'll be Easter, and by then, who knows what state she'll be in..."

"Remember, Lily, your mum is strong, and even though you won't physically be there, you'll be there in spirit. She knows you love her," Severus tried to reassure her.

"Sev?" Lily whispered.

"Yes?"

"When I'm not strong, can you be strong for me?"

"You don't even have to ask, Lily," Severus said gently. "That goes without saying, but yes, for the record, I will do my best."

"Thank you." There was a pause, then she murmured, "What happened while I was gone?"

It was Severus's turn to sigh. He explained in detail the incident in the Slytherin common room and his discussion with Dumbledore.

"I'm glad he was expelled," Lily stated harshly. "What a horrible thing to do. And Dumbledore... I'm relieved he's truly gracious toward you. I always thought he had good intentions, but my faith in him was tested when I had to talk with him. I guess he's just doing the best he can in the given circumstances."

"Perhaps," Severus replied, not completely convinced. While he had come to an understanding with Dumbledore, he still couldn't bring himself to trust him fully. There was too much of a history that stated otherwise.

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As February passed, Lily kept in regular contact with her mother through letters. She could tell from the tone of the letters that her mum was putting forth a good front, and while Violet Evans didn't complain about the pain and fatigue she was experiencing as a result of the chemo, Lily knew her mum had to be suffering.

Severus, thinking ahead for his future career, decided to start researching what he could on magic being used to heal diseases. The literature in the library was out of date and therefore didn't prove very helpful when it came to matters like cancer, so Severus subscribed to a couple of publications that were released biweekly on the latest findings in magical research. He was disappointed. His fears were confirmed: There was no mention of magic being used to cure or help cancer.

He would have to turn to other avenues, which involved reading Muggle literature on such things, but nothing like that was available at Hogwarts, and he knew he would have a hard time of it trying to get connections to Muggle publications on scientific research. He figured he might make some arrangements through Lily's parents. Frustrated, Severus sought out Madam Pomfrey, who, although delighted he would be following the career path to becoming a Healer, had nothing more to say on the subject of why magic wasn't being investigated further to cure cancer and other such diseases.

"It's a shame, really," she said sadly, shaking her head.

A shame, indeed, Severus thought.

Without success in that venue, Severus poured himself into training the students in duelling. They had come a long way since the beginning of the year.

March eventually came, and with it, milder weather and a lot of rain. Too many dreary days of being confined to the castle was making Severus stir-crazy, and while he had Lily and the success with the duelling club, he was growing tired of being stuck at Hogwarts. He yearned for the school year to be over.

In Slytherin, Severus caught some of the suspicious students, Masterson and even Regulus, whispering amongst themselves on occasion when he entered the common room to check on the students. They would cast him a glare or two and turn and leave before Severus could confront them. He would try to keep a close watch on them, but trying to keep peace was like trying to keep a brush fire under control. It only took a small spark to ignite an entire forest.

Another month passed, and suspicions only grew, and Mrs. Evans's condition seemed to worsen, based on what Lily knew. It was with growing foreboding that Severus faced April.

Chapter Sixty-Nine

April bloomed with the usual promises that spring brought every year, a feeling of renewal as life came out of the crevices and flowers popped up from the ground. So far, the year had proven challenging and emotionally draining for both Severus and Lily. Their time at Hogwarts was quickly drawing to a close, but N.E.W.T.s were the least of their concerns.

While the threat of war grew by the day, that reality had not yet fully culminated. For Lily, her mind had been mostly on her mother, whose condition, she knew, had worsened since she had last seen her. Letters weren't enough. She longed to see her mum again, worrying and wondering if it might be the last time.

She tried not to think about that. Instead of boarding the train, Severus and Lily opted to Apparate home for spring break. Lily was anxious to return home after three months, wondering what would greet her.

The walk to the boundary of the school grounds was otherwise pleasant, for the spring day was in its prime. The rustling of tiny leaves, the fragrant smell of buds, and the sound of chirping birds helped put Lily's wary mind at ease as she strolled alongside Severus, hand in hand.

"Petunia will be even more distant, I'm sure," Lily was saying. "Mum said she had to drop out of school temporarily to help out at home."

"You can't blame yourself for that," Severus replied. "You're still finishing your formal education, whereas Petunia is going to university. There's a difference."

"I still feel badly about it," Lily contended. "Petunia isn't likely to see it that way. We haven't spoken in *four* months, Severus, but I am sure she's thinking dark thoughts about me at this very moment. Don't you think every day, every minute she is at home helping Mum, she isn't festering about having to take on all the responsibility?"

"A fair point, to be sure," Severus said as kindly as possible. "I understand your concern, Lily; I do. I had considered dropping out of

school myself when my mum was sick. It wasn't an easy decision to make, but I think having your mum in the care of your sister is better than leaving her in the care of more or less strangers."

"That's true, but doesn't change the fact that Petunia..." she trailed off, realizing the conversation was going no where. "Anyway, Mum isn't doing well. I've known that. We both know that, but seeing her for the first time... Sev, she's lost her hair, lost weight, and is tired all the time. Just *seeing* her like that is going to be horrible, and that's just the outward appearance. Think how much she must be suffering inwardly... physically and mentally."

"Your mum is strong, Lily. She's a fighter. Just... when you see her, just try to see your mum through all the differences in her appearance. She's still the same person you know and love."

Lily nodded. "I know," she said softly, staring at the ground. They had arrived at their destination.

Severus took her hand. "Are you ready?" he asked gingerly.

"Yes."

With a crack, they Apparated directly into Spinner's End, which was really the only safe place for them to openly Apparate in a Muggle neighborhood. Once again, Severus's home was dusty and smelled of stale air from months of not being used.

He placed his belongings on the floor. "We can go to your house immediately if that's what you want. There's nothing for me in this house."

"Thanks, Sev."

They left Spinner's End a minute later. Spring was in its glory here at well, but the walk that would have been otherwise relaxing was anything but. Lily kept fretting, her hands nervously intertwining in front of her as she walked. Knowing that speaking was oftentimes overrated, Severus remained silent, but he wished to take her hand, if only to ease her nerves. Lily let him, but her free hand still picked at the fabric on her jeans as she made her way home.

When they arrived at Lily's house, Lily took a deep breath, readying herself for what she was about to face.

"All right, let's go," she murmured.

Severus gave her hand a light squeeze, and they walked up the driveway to the front walk, to the porch, and Lily opened the door.

"Mum, Dad, I'm home for the holiday!" she announced, putting on a brave face.

Shortly thereafter, Lily's parents were approaching them. Violet's face was pale and drawn, her cheekbones sticking out. Her clothes hung loosely off her thin frame, and she had the evidence of tiredness on her features. The dark circles around her eyes didn't hide the light in her eyes, though. There was hope there, and when she smiled, the old version of Lily's mum returned. She was completely bald, however, that being the most shocking thing to see. Equally surprising, Ross Evans had very little hair. His light brown hair was nothing more than stubble on his head.

"Oh, honey," Mrs. Evans said lovingly. "It's so good to see you. And, Severus, you as well!"

Lily hugged her mum. "You look good, Mum."

Mrs. Evans laughed. "You don't have to lie, dear. I know I must look a fright."

"No, I meant it," Lily said truthfully, surprised she was handling seeing her mum's appearance so well. It was Mrs. Evans's positive attitude and good mental state radiating through the raggedness of her physical appearance that made her beautiful. "You are lovely, Mum."

When mother and daughter released each other, Lily went to her father. "Hi, Dad," she said, now hugging him. "What's this you've done?" she posed curiously, indicating his hair.

"Lily, darling," he replied kindly, returning the gesture. "It was to show support for your mum. I work with a bloke whose wife also had breast

cancer, and he shaved off his hair to show support for his wife. I thought it a bold statement, so the hair came off two days ago."

Lily smiled at his shaven head. "That's really sweet, Dad."

Severus watched the exchange between Lily and her parents, relieved she could find the happiness in the tears, the hope in the hardships. He hugged Mrs. Evans and shook Mr. Evans's hand. They talked briefly about their time at Hogwarts. The whole time, Petunia was nowhere to be seen.

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Lily sat in front of the mirror of the vanity in her bedroom. She ran her hands through her thick, long hair, holding on to a lock once her fingers reached the ends. She had always loved her hair, and so had Severus, but seeing her mum's bald head just moments ago had changed her priorities. Hair was just hair, after all, and it would grow back...

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Severus asked hesitantly. He held the electric clipper in his hand. "It's very thoughtful of you to show your support for your mother, but if you're afraid-"

"I'm not afraid," Lily interrupted. "Let's just... get this over with."

"All right," Severus sighed.

Turning the clipper on, he brought it close to Lily's head, and starting at the temple, gingerly placed the razor blade there and slowly, experimentally, moved it toward the back of Lily's head. As the clipper moved, locks of long, red hair fell to the floor. Lily watched in the mirror, entranced by what she was witnessing. She never imagined shaving her head, so the whole process was quite surreal. Severus moved the razor blade back to the front and repeated the process, and more hair joined the pile on the floor. As he carefully did his work, Lily was left with about a quarter inch of stubble on her head. Finally finished, Severus turned off the clipper and placed it on the vanity.

Lily reached with a shaking hand to her head and ran it over the red stubble. In spite of herself, she laughed.

"It feels so... weird," she remarked. "I look so... strange."

"You're still beautiful," Severus stated, kissing her forehead. "You can really see your facial features well, and your eyes really stand out now. I've always loved your eyes, you know."

Lily smiled up at him. "You don't think I look like an alien or something?"

"Of course not," Severus said gently. "Like I said, it's really admirable what you're doing for your mum. In fact..." His eyes drifted to the clipper. "Would you return the favor?"

A part of Severus couldn't believe he was suggesting what he was, but then again, he had just done something to Lily he never thought he would do in a million years. He had always liked his hair long, but this had nothing to do with vanity.

"What?" Lily asked, gaping. "You mean, you would- ?"

"Yes, I consider her like a mum to me," Severus explained softly. "We are to one day be married, and I am honored to be a part of your family. It's the least I could do."

"Well... all right," Lily said hesitantly. "If you're sure..."

"I am," Severus said confidently.

They switched places. Lily now held the clipper in her hands. For some reason, she was having a harder time with this than Severus had, but finally, she turned the clipper on and began the process on her fiancé. Severus's black hair joined the red tendrils already littering the floor, and within five minutes, his head resembled Lily's, only the stubble was black instead of red.

Severus gaped at himself for a few seconds. Never had he imagined having so little hair, as his hair had been long ever since he could remember. The look wasn't particularly flattering on him, but he hadn't done it for himself.

"I think my nose looks bigger," he remarked wryly.

Lily giggled. "Oh, Sev, stop. You do look different, but so do I. It's funny how different a person can look by just removing his or her hair."

Severus stood, brushing excess hair off himself. Looking down at the hair on the floor, he asked, "What should we do with it? I can vanish it away easily enough."

Lily shrugged. "Might as well. I'll help you."

Together, they withdrew their wands, uttering, "Evanescio," and vanishing the hair from the floor, leaving the carpet clean.

"What will your mother say?" Severus wondered aloud. "She probably doesn't expect her daughter to be nearly bald when she goes down for dinner."

"Let's not wait until dinner," Lily said, smiling and reaching for his hand. "I want to show her now... Let her know we're supporting her through this. The only thing that would be more shocking for her would be if Petunia shaved her head!"

Snorting, Severus let Lily lead him out of her room and down the hall. There was a foreign draft of cool air on his neck, and his head felt cold. Once they were downstairs, Lily wasted no time in seeking out her mother, who was in the sitting room watching television.

Mrs. Evans glanced up when she noticed them entering the room, and the instant her eyes rested upon the two teenagers, her mouth opened in surprise.

"Lily, Severus? What did you do?" she questioned.

Going to her mum, Lily took her hand and squeezed it. "We wanted to show our support, Mum. We know it's hard enough for you to be going through the chemo, and for everyone to see it and know... well, we just didn't want you to be alone."

Mrs. Evans's eyes started to water. She stood and pulled her daughter into a warm embrace. "Thank you, Lily... and Severus." She opened the embrace, beckoning Severus to join them.

Severus shyly walked across the room and shared in the group hug. He had never experienced such a thing before.

"You have no idea what this means to me," Mrs. Evans whispered. "Thank you so much."

x x x x x

At dinner, Petunia was shocked to see her entire family and Severus more or less without hair. Although she didn't say anything, her mouth briefly hung open when she entered the dining room.

Mr. Evans expressed his gratitude for Lily and Severus's selflessness. "When I did this, I didn't expect anyone else to, but how thoughtful of you to do this for your mother."

Lily blushed, then glanced at Petunia. She wondered what her sister was thinking. Lily certainly hadn't done it for attention, but there was little doubt that Petunia was thinking that Lily had tried to gain her parents' approval again.

"Actually," Lily said, "I never thought I'd do something like this, but for you, Mum, it's worth it."

"I appreciate it," Mrs. Evans affirmed. "When I first lost my hair, it was a hard thing to deal with. One of my fears later became so trivial, though. I've realized what's truly important: all of you in this room."

Severus noticed Lily and Petunia both blinking tears away. The words went unsaid, but the sentiment was there. In her struggle to fight the cancer, Violet had grown stronger, and Severus was glad Lily could finally see that.

Dinner went smoothly, and some time later, after Severus had gone home, Lily was in the sitting room watching the evening news. Without notice, Petunia came into the room and shuffled her way to the other end of the couch. She sat down carefully.

"You look ridiculous, you know," Petunia suddenly said.

For a moment, Lily thought her ears had to be deceiving her. Petunia hadn't uttered a single word to her in months. Lily stood and went to the telly to turn it off. She resumed her seat.

"Maybe," Lily said with a shrug, "but you should know by now why I did it."

Petunia cast her a skeptical look. "Did you really do it for Mum?" she asked quietly.

"I did," Lily stated evenly, trying not to be defensive. She paused as Petunia looked away. "Look, Petunia," she finally said, "I'm sorry, okay?"

"You're sorry?" Petunia asked bitterly. "Isn't it a bit too late for that?" Lowering her voice, she hissed, "You know full well that I've been taking care of Mum these past several months while you've been off at school in your own world, away from the concerns of your life back home. You go off with *him* into your magical place, and you can just forget about us here. I've *seen* how Mum's suffered every step of the way, and you come back here and shave off your hair in a display that's supposed to convince us that you're all noble and selfless?"

Lily sighed. She didn't want to start arguing again. "Petunia, please... I did this because I wanted to... for Mum. I'm not asking you to do it. We all show our support in the ways we can, and you've already been doing more than enough by staying home and taking care of her. I feel truly horrible that I haven't been able to be home more. It's not fair that you had to give up your plans and I didn't. It's not fair that Mum has to have cancer. The whole bloody thing isn't fair... but what do you want from me? I've apologized. I've tried to tell you that I was wrong to be so insensitive to your situation. Petunia, I don't know what else I can say or do."

Petunia had a hard time believing Lily's words, but when she heard her sister's voice break, she relented. "It's not fair; you're right. If we... lose Mum... Lily, what will happen to us?"

"Have I already lost you, Petunia?" Lily asked despondently.

Petunia wiped at her eyes. "I'm right here, Lily. I had hoped... I hadn't lost you. I had hoped you still wanted me in your life."

"Oh, Petunia," Lily sighed, moved and relieved, all barriers breaking down as she crossed the short distance between them and threw her arms around her sister. "No, I'm not going anywhere. I swear it."

Petunia struggled to return the affection, but after a few seconds, her arms tentatively wrapped around Lily's back.

Neither young woman saw their mother standing in the doorway, tears of happiness in her hopeful eyes.

"Thank you, God," Mrs. Evans murmured.

Author's Note: Some of you may be asking why I had them do something so outrageous as shave their hands. The answer is there in the context, but in case you missed it: It was to show support for Mrs. Evans. I've known people who have done this for loved ones who are going through chemo, and I think it's very touching and sweet. It is completely true that I don't generally like it when I read a fic where Severus's hair is cut short, but this is an exception. I did this partly because it was, for me, overcoming a stupid pet peeve and doing so in a logical and meaningful way. But in case you're missing their hair already, it will grow back! I don't intend to keep them nearly bald.

I imagine there are spells that can make hair grow back faster or to any length you want, but they won't be using any such spells any time soon. It's all natural, the process.

Oh, and here's a new drawing I did: [sindie11 . deviantart . com / art / Shaggy-Sev-80009456](http://sindie11.deviantart.com/art/Shaggy-Sev-80009456)(remove spaces) This is Severus at about Christmas time in 1978, and you can see that he's got shaggy-type hair. It doesn't look bad, I don't think. You can see that his hair will be longer again soon:p

If anyone would be so gracious as to draw fanart for this chapter or of them with shorter hair, I'd be interested. That would be interesting to see.

Anyway, I wanted to say one more thing. This story will go until 1981. It's 1978 right now. There will be roughly 150 chapters. By chapter 75, I hope to have Severus and Lily graduated. After that, the war aspect, including the problems with the Horcruxes and the prophecy, become very important and the main plot of the story. There will be an epilogue set a few years in the future.

We return to Hogwarts in the next chapter, and I promise you some more "fun" (or as I like to call it, "tormenting of the poor characters") before graduation. It'll be a few days before the next update, seeing as I've given you about five updates in a week. :) You're spoiled, you are.

Chapter Seventy

A week later, Severus and Lily were at Spinner's End, getting ready to return to Hogwarts. Their hair had grown just slightly, and by now, they were used to having so little hair.

Lily was running her hand over her head, smiling. "It's going to be quite a shock when we return to Hogwarts."

Severus wished he could share her lightheartedness, but he knew he would be given strange looks and rude remarks would be made, especially by the Marauders. "At least you have a pretty face, Lily," Severus stated. "I can't say I'm looking forward to their reactions."

"Aw, Sev, who cares what others think? After all this time, after all you've been through and come out the stronger and better for it, you're worried about something so silly as hair?" Lily asked.

Severus briefly ran his hand over the stubble. "Please don't think I'm regretting it, Lily. I am still glad we did this to show support for your mum, but my hair... I was used to hiding behind it when I felt the need. There were still moments when I would."

Severus couldn't believe how shallow he was sounding, but he had never taken well to receiving attention, and coming back with little hair would definitely draw unwanted attention.

Lily came to him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. "You could always use a charm to grow it back in a matter of seconds, and besides, I think you're handsome either way," she said softly.

Severus snorted at her compliment and shook his head. "Absolutely not. Lily," he said, setting his jaw firmly, "we're going through this together. Your mum is the one who's really having a hard time, so every time I look in the mirror, I'll think of her."

Touched by his words, Lily kissed him. "It's not so bad. We'll get to grow our hair out together, and once Mum is better, her hair will come back... maybe curly or something. I've heard that people's hair can change color or become curly if it had been straight after they've lost it because of chemo."

"I didn't know that," Severus replied.

Lily nodded and then examined the engagement ring on her hand and smiled. "You know, I'm going to leave the ring on this time. School will be over in a couple of months. Don't you think it's time people know?"

The thought of more attention made Severus blush, but he wasn't ashamed. "Yes, leave it on," Severus said. *If Potter just so happens to still fancy Lily, let him be jealous.* "Every other bloke can brag about having a girlfriend, but I have a fiancée." Severus allowed a smooth smile to creep onto his face as he uttered "fiancée."

"Mmm, say that again, Sev," Lily whispered in his ear.

Her breath tingled his ear lobe. Suddenly, the stress from the last few months demanded release in the form of physical affection. He brought his lips to her ear, practically purring, "Fiancée." Taking her lobe in his mouth, he gave it a gentle nibble, then slowly ran his tongue along the outside of her ear, moving to her jawline, placing small kisses along it, coming to the corner of her mouth, teasing her with continued, little pecks. His lips barely brushed her sensitive skin there, and Lily moaned with pleasure, wanting more.

Feeling her knees growing weak beneath her, Lily reached for the buttons on his shirt, fumbling with them. She managed to undo the top three and then rubbed her hands over his warm chest. Severus had both hands around Lily's torso and moved them lower down her back. He slid them under the waistband of her jeans and gave her behind a squeeze.

Lily jumped, releasing a momentary squeak, and then leaned into him, her body responding to his touch. Her hands now roamed to his neck, then to his face, cupping his cheeks as she kissed him fervently. Severus's hands continued to massage her back under her top, and entwined, they made their way across the room to the couch, Lily on the bottom and Severus on top.

Lily unbuttoned his shirt completely, pushing it off his shoulders. "You don't need this," she breathed.

Severus shrugged the shirt off, glad to be rid of it. His hands were now on her front, and he leaned down, nuzzling and kissing her neck, going lower to her collarbone, and pushing her blouse down, he kissed the tender skin a little lower. His hands explored to her front, going to her chest to gently feel her soft breasts. Lily's hands simultaneously went lower down his exposed back, and she held on to his behind and released a series of happy groans at his touch. Severus emitted a low growl, his hormones raging.

"Lily," he panted, "if we don't stop-"

"Sev, it's okay," Lily replied, sounding equally out of breath. "I want to."

Closing his eyes, Severus willed himself to calm down. She was still in school and so young yet. *No, not yet.*

"Lily, trust me when I say I want to... You have no idea, but... the time needs to be right."

Lily removed her hands from his back and let them drop. The heat of the moment lost, Severus mentally kicked himself and withdrew from lying on top of her. He sat awkwardly on the couch and buried his face in his hands, embarrassed, wishing his hair was long again so he could hide his flushed cheeks.

"Sev?" Lily asked tentatively. She touched his shoulder. "What's the matter? If you wanted to and I wanted to, I don't see what the problem is."

"Lily," Severus groaned in his hands. "I'm sorry. It's just... not the right time yet."

"Severus, look at me," Lily demanded, sounding hurt.

Severus withdrew his hands and gazed at her. She looked like she was put out and about to cry.

"Lily, no," he said weakly, taking her hands in his. "Please don't take this the wrong way."

"But I don't understand," Lily said, the tears now falling. "After all we've been through..."

"Lily, listen," he explained hastily. "Call me old fashioned, but- but I think we ought to wait until we're married first."

Lily sighed. "You sound like my parents."

"This summer, I promise you, Lily," Severus said, his heart thumping.

"You mean, you want to marry this summer?" Lily questioned, shocked.

"Lily, there is nothing I would rather do than spend my life with you; you know that. After Hogwarts, what's holding us back? Nothing. You can live here if you like. You'd be close to your family. I know the house isn't much..."

"No, it's perfect, Sev," Lily gently interrupted. "If you want to wait, I will, too. I understand. You want it to be special."

Severus managed a smile. He leaned in and kissed her. "We can talk about the details later... er, the wedding, I mean." He didn't think it necessary to discuss the details of love making.

"All right." Gazing at their bags, Lily murmured, "I guess we ought to get going."

"Let's just get ourselves straightened up first," Severus stated, reaching for his shirt. "It wouldn't do to return without a shirt on."

Lily giggled. "No, I guess not. At least we don't have to worry about brushing our hair."

Severus laughed.

A few minutes later, they were composed and ready to go. Grabbing their bags, they Apparated to the boundary of Hogwarts.

Once they had arrived, they began the long trek back to the school's main entrance. They had arrived before the train, so for a couple of

hours, they wouldn't have to concern themselves with the surprised comments they would be receiving about their new hairdos.

The walk across the grounds was peaceful, as the day was simply beautiful. Spring was now in its full glory. The lawn was vibrant green from the March rains, littered with flowers here and there. The sun was out, warming them as they walked.

"What a lovely day," Lily remarked, sighing happily, closing her eyes and lifting her face toward the sky. She smiled.

"Indeed," Severus returned, his hand intertwined with hers. Instead of looking at the sky, however, he had eyes only for the flower next to him.

"Do you think we might take a walk outside after we put our things in our rooms?" Lily posed.

"That's a good idea," Severus agreed.

Eventually, they reached the stairs to the main doors and mounted them. Upon entering the castle, they were greeted with silence. The Entrance Hall stood empty before them, which was a strange sight to behold.

"Do you just want to meet back here in ten minutes?" Lily suggested.

"That sounds fine," Severus replied.

That way, they would save on time and be able to be back outside sooner.

Ten minutes later, the Head Boy and Head Girl strolled back into the Entrance Hall simultaneously.

"Good timing," Severus quipped.

"Come on, Sev," Lily said. "It won't be long, and this blessed silence will be gone."

Eager to return outside with Lily, Severus walked toward the door, Lily by his side. They made their way back down the steps, going along the path toward the gates, and then veering off to the right across the grass. The lake was still a bit of a distance from them.

Lily started walking faster, breaking into a run. She giggled as she took off, leaving Severus watching her, amused.

"Come on, Sev!" Lily beckoned.

"We're not little kids, Lily!" Severus called back, shaking his head as he continued to walk.

"Oh, where's your sense of a little fun, Sev?" Lily teased lightly. "No one else is around, and it's a gorgeous day! We've got the grounds completely to ourselves!"

"Well, all right," Severus gave in, smiling.

He ran after Lily, which seemed to spur her on. She ran more rapidly, laughing and challenging him to try and catch her. Adrenaline pumping through him, Severus's long legs and youthful burst of energy moved him along, steadily gaining ground and lessening the distance between them. Finally, catching up with Lily, Severus grabbed her around the waist and pulled her to the ground. She landed on him, and together, they laughed.

After their laughter died, Lily gazed down upon her fiancé, smiling sweetly. She leaned in and kissed him. Severus gave into the urge, oblivious to the surroundings. In the midst of a war, Mrs. Evans's cancer, upcoming N.E.W.T.s, the uncertain future, and other ungoing struggles, sometimes it just felt right to let go for a little while. The two young lovers focused solely on each other.

Losing track of time, they drifted off in the grass, resting under a large willow tree not too far from the lake. A rude awakening came when an unpleasant voice interrupted their slumber, however.

"Oi! What's this?"

Severus's eyes snapped open, and his body immediately tensed. He instinctively reached for his wand, but his guard having been down, whoever had just spoken had nonverbally disarmed him. Severus felt his wand slip out of his grasp in less than a second. Beside him, Lily was rousing, and before she could react, her wand was gone as well.

Severus sat up, pulling Lily up with him, and together, they stood. Standing protectively next to Lily, Severus glared at their attacker.

Attackers.

Ten feet away was Masterson, leading the faction of students who Roger Mulciber had previously led.

Shit, Severus cursed. *If it's not one troublemaking bastard, it's another.*

"Taking Mulciber's esteemed place?" Severus asked snidely.

"You could say that," Masterson replied, smirking. "What'd you do to yourself, Snape? As if you weren't ugly enough before-

"Shut up!" Lily barked, angered at Masterson's remark.

The smirk left Masterson's face, and he glared at Lily. "You'd do well to shut your filthy mouth, you Mudblood."

"Don't you *dare*-" Severus started to say.

"Looks like you're not so tough without your wand," Masterson continued.

"And how sweet that your girl has a haircut just like you," another boy, named Jacob Wade, taunted.

Just as Severus was about to tackle Masterson and try to retrieve their wands, Masterson's wand, as well as Lily and Severus's, went flying out of his thick hand. Caught off-guard, Masterson started to turn and was Stunned. Wade and a couple of others were about to attack, but they were disarmed and Stunned as well.

Curious as to who had stopped the Slytherins, Severus turned his gaze beyond the group of boys now lying on the ground. Much to his surprise, he saw James, Sirius, and Remus. Lily gasped, but then smiled.

"Thanks!" she exclaimed gratefully.

James approached them, handing their wands back to them. "No problem," he replied, unable to keep a slight smirk off his face. "Looks like you can't *always* be on top of your game, Snape, despite what you told us in those lessons."

Severus resisted the urge to retort, but James and his friends had just rescued them. To say he was shocked would be an understatement. The old grudge Severus felt toward James for saving his life over two years previously still simmered below the surface, but this time, he realized that perhaps James's intervention had been genuine. They were allies now, after all.

"Nice hair," Sirius said sarcastically, his laughter like a bark. "Did you finally decide your hair was too greasy, Snape? Such a cruel thing to impose it on Lily, though."

Lily frowned. "For your information, Sirius, we did this because my mum has cancer, and she's lost her hair because of the chemotherapy treatments she's been receiving. We wanted to show our support. And secondly, Severus's hair hasn't been greasy in a long time."

"Oh, uh, that was really thoughtful of you," Sirius said, feeling guilty, and looking directly at Lily.

James was rendered speechless, but Remus added, "I'm sorry about your mum, Lily. I didn't know."

"I didn't tell anyone, but it's been a while now," Lily replied. Not wishing to discuss her mum further in front of everyone, her eyes flickered to Masterson and the others. "What do you suppose we do with them?"

"Leave them," Severus said harshly. "Let them come round on their own."

"Aren't you worried about retribution, Sev?" Lily asked, worried.

"It's nothing I haven't already faced before," Severus sighed. "I'll inform the headmaster. Perhaps the lot of you should come along as witnesses."

"All right," James agreed, and Sirius and Remus nodded.

"Why did they attack you, anyway?" Sirius questioned as they began walking toward the castle.

"That's a hard question, Black," Severus said sardonically. "Could it be because they're supporters of You-Know-Who?"

"Right," Sirius mumbled, no doubt thinking of his own family. His face darkened.

"Come on," Severus sighed as they entered the castle. "Let just... get this over with."

The good mood from earlier was gone. His footsteps heavy, Severus led the others toward Dumbledore's office, knowing the two months left at Hogwarts would be no less burdensome than they had been before, and beyond Hogwarts, life was bound to become more complicated.

He met Lily's eyes and kept his focus there. Staring back at him was his light in darkness.

Author's Note: Please vote in the poll I've created. You can find it on my bio page. Thanks!

Chapter Seventy-One

Severus barked the password at the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the headmaster's office. His patience was waning. He was tired of the constant replay of having to report to Dumbledore the problems within Slytherin. One after another, the bastards kept coming out of the woodwork and rising. There would always be someone trying to raise hell, whether in the school or out in the world.

Lily gave Severus a concerned look, noticing the wary and annoyed expression he wore on his face. Standing next to him on the stairs, she took his hand, not caring what the Marauders right behind her thought. Neither Lily nor Severus saw James's eyes travel to their clasped hands and notice the ring gleaming on Lily's finger. They reached the top, and Severus banged on the door, the insistent pounding travelling through the enclosed space.

"Jeez, Snape, would you calm down?" James asked exasperatedly, and his eyes once again flickered to Lily's hand.

Severus didn't even glance over his shoulder to acknowledge the remark, but Lily looked behind her, and she saw where James's eyes were resting. The two exchanged a strange look, and Lily figured James would be inquiring about the ring later. She shook her head a fraction and turned back around to face the door.

Severus was staring stonily ahead at the door, waiting for it to open. As usual, he wasn't kept waiting long. The next thing he knew, Dumbledore was standing in front of him. The headmaster's eyes roamed over the five students gathered outside his door, and when they settled on Severus and Lily, the odd look on Dumbledore's face didn't escape Severus.

"Welcome back," he said to the group at large. Examining the lack of hair on Severus and Lily, Dumbledore inquired, "Is this the newest fashion trend? I daresay, what a bold statement." Dumbledore then had the audacity to smile.

"No, Headmaster," Severus said curtly. "That is inconsequential. We're here for much more important matters."

Sighing, Dumbledore stepped aside. "Very well, do come in." Dumbledore was no doubt surprised to see Severus accompanied by the boys who used to be his rivals.

Everyone entered, and Dumbledore conjured enough comfortable armchairs to accommodate them all. "Do sit down," he said with a gesture. "Tea, anyone?"

"Sure, thanks, sir," James replied immediately.

"That'd be nice, thanks," Sirius added.

Remus politely declined, and Lily simply shook her head. Severus took his seat, frowning. He loathed the way Dumbledore always invited people into his office like he was having them over for a lovely get-together. Dumbledore proceeded to pour James and Sirius their tea, then took a seat.

"Well, why, may I ask, the visit? Surely you aren't here simply to say hello upon returning after your spring holiday?" Dumbledore inquired.

"Of course not," Severus said stiffly. "We're here, Headmaster, because Dennis Masterson led a group of students to attack Lily and me. If it weren't for Potter here..." Severus trailed off, still too ashamed for being caught off guard and for having to be rescued by James, of all people.

Dumbledore turned his head toward James. "What did you see, Mr. Potter?"

"What Snape says is true, sir," James replied, sounding over the top. "We were approaching the school, having just returned, and saw Masterson and a few others upon them. We Stunned them."

"And where are these students now?"

"Still outside," Sirius said nonchalantly.

"Thank you for telling me," Dumbledore said more gravely. "I will go out there myself and take care of things. You may, of course, remain to finish your tea."

That said, the headmaster stood and exited the office. Severus made to stand, seeing no reason to remain, but Lily's hand reached for his arm, stopping him.

Severus looked at her questioningly.

"Relax, Sev," she said, offering a smile.

Severus slumped back into his chair. "Relax?" he asked. "How can I relax? Those idiots aren't quite the idiots I thought they were. They managed to disarm us, Lily!"

"Ah, I see what this is about," James interjected smartly. "You, the high and mighty trainer of lesser mortals, can't stand to be outdone by a mere fifth year. And you say I'm arrogant."

"Get stuffed, Potter," Severus returned rudely.

Sirius laughed at the exchange before him. "Well, maybe someone needs to teach *you* some new tricks, Snape."

"Oh, and I suppose you're going to volunteer to teach me?" Severus shot at James and Sirius.

James shrugged. "No, sorry. I don't know how to do wandless magic."

"See, Snape? You accuse James of having a big ego, but he knows when to admit he doesn't know something," Sirius stated smugly.

Severus wanted to hex that look off of Sirius's pretty face. "You're more annoying than he is, Black."

"It wouldn't hurt to be open to learning from others, Severus," Remus pointed out mildly. "The lessons you've been giving others have been valuable, for sure, but perhaps it's time you broaden your abilities."

Severus was seething. He was a grown wizard with powers to rival many other historical figures.

"I don't need-" he started to say.

"Sev," Lily said gently, "no one knows everything. I don't know how to wandlessly summon anything, but next time we're disarmed, it would be useful to know how to do that."

"There won't be a next time," Severus argued.

"Be realistic, Snape," James stated, no joking this time. "Once we're out of school, we're going to be facing real life, and you know what's going on out there."

"*Fine*," Severus snapped. "Who do you suggest teach me such a thing?"

The others swapped clueless looks and shrugged.

"If we can't find someone, then we'll teach ourselves," Lily stated adamantly. "We're an intelligent lot. We'll figure it out."

Sighing, Severus uttered, "I guess we have something on the agenda for Monday's lesson, then."

The Marauders appeared excited at the prospect of learning how to do wandless magic, but Severus was sullen. It was true that he had managed to do wandless magic with certain things, like having the chalk write lessons on the board when he had been a professor. As a child, he had been able to do wandless magic, as had Lily, but like most wizard children, they did it without really having to think about it. Once they entered their formal education, much of that unbound power was lost as they were forced into focusing their skill on the use of wands.

James and Sirius finished their tea, slurping it distastefully, and setting the cups down in unison, making too big of a spectacle of it, in Severus's opinion.

James choose that opportunity to remark, "Nice ring, Lily." He gazed at Severus, eyebrows raised in question.

Lily blushed, having forgotten she was wearing the ring. "Thanks, James," she replied awkwardly. Then, finding her resolve, she added, "It's an engagement ring."

She smiled proudly, which gave Severus reason to want to withdraw from the room instantly. He felt extremely uncomfortable in the scrutiny of the Marauders.

"I thought so," James said. Severus could tell the other boy was holding back further comments in his presence.

"Out with it, Potter," Severus snarled. "You're thinking something. For example: 'How could Lily have agreed to marry you, Sniv-'"

"Severus," Lily said warningly.

James burst out laughing. "Not even married yet, and you two are arguing like it's been years."

"And since James was too much of a gentleman to say it, I'll gladly oblige," Sirius cut in. "I can't believe you're marrying *him*, Lily." He chuckled.

Remus looked embarrassed at his friends' comments and glanced apologetically at Severus and Lily. Severus hated Remus's sympathy more than he loathed being the victim of James and Sirius's jokes.

More on edge than he had been in a long time, still humiliated from being attacked, Severus stood and hissed, "Better she's with me than you, Potter. If you're still jealous after all this time, then that's not my problem."

James held up his hands. "I never said anything. I never insinuated what you were assuming I was thinking, Snape. It's not my problem you don't know how to take a joke. In case you haven't noticed, I've been dating Mary since the beginning of the year. Lily's just my friend, and if that makes you uncomfortable, then maybe you would do well to learn what it's like to have other friends besides Lily."

"I think it comes too naturally to him to just be a rude git," Sirius muttered to James.

"You talk like I'm not here to hear you, Black," Severus said waspishly.

Finally hearing too much, Lily stood and came in between them. "Enough!" she yelled, glaring at them. "I thought this nonsense was in the past. We're all on the same side here, but if we can't get along, how do you expect to work together to fight the real threat that's out there?"

"She's right, Padfoot, Prongs," Remus tried to reason with his friends.

Severus had his arms folded over his chest. While he could force himself to calm down around most others, he found that very difficult in the presence of James and Sirius. Sighing, he resignedly dropped his arms to his sides. "I agree with you, Lily," he muttered.

"All right, then," she said. "Let's go before Dumbledore returns and wonders what we're still doing in his office."

James and Sirius headed for the door, no longer in their usual good moods.

"See you two around," Remus said with a weak wave, following his mates out.

Severus cast Lily one last dejected look before standing and walking out with her a minute later.

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The rest of the week was one of the worst Severus had endured during his seventh year. While he normally wouldn't have cared about the shocked looks his new hairdo received, there were too many other factors contributing to his sour mood. News of his engagement to Lily spread like a forest fire, and some people were happy for him, expressing their congratulations, but some of the his own house thought it simply repulsive what he was doing: marrying a Mudblood. The Gryffindors who still couldn't fathom why Lily would be friends with Severus all those years gazed at him distrustfully in passing, some remarking under their breath that she was too good for someone like him.

Most students, however, either kept quiet or were glad for Lily and him. In the eyes of many students, Severus was still a hero, and they

assumed his now half-inch long hair was a bold statement he was making to bring awareness to the war effort. He would politely correct anyone who thought so, but refrained from elaborating further. It wasn't his story to tell, after all. If Lily wanted others to know of her mother's condition with the cancer, she would tell them.

In the Slytherin common room every evening, Masterson, Regulus Black, and four or five others were usually absent. Masterson hadn't confronted Severus since his attack their first day back, but Severus wasn't fooled. He knew the group of boys was up to no good and had chosen to lie low for the time being.

When Monday evening finally came, Severus's mood was still bitter, and his temper was on edge. Lily wondered what she could do to help, but any time she tried, Severus would shrug and tell her that he just needed to get through this on his own. With concerned, sad eyes, Lily now watched her fiancé as he took his place at the front of the classroom. The Severus she had known in the past would close himself up around her at times, and the fact that he was resorting to such behavior again was worrisome.

Severus didn't waste his breath in welcoming the students back from their spring holiday. Instead, he announced, "I'm hoping to move on to wandless magic today, specifically learning how to summon, *Accio*, which you all have already learned with a wand. This would be important in a battle should you find yourself without your wand. Is there anyone here who has ever tried to summon something wandlessly?"

Severus scanned the room, but everyone either stared back at him silently or was glancing around, shrugging and shaking their heads. Just as Severus thought, no one knew how to wandlessly summon something.

"Very well," he stated. "It's a good thing I read up on it, and although I've started practicing, I still haven't mastered it. I can manage to make something twitch slightly toward me from its position, but that is all. Even I will be learning something new with you. I'll demonstrate what I know, but you're on your own from there..."

Severus placed his wand on the ground and stepped three feet away. "I find it works best to start with a short distance. Until you can summon something from a short distance, you won't be able to do it from a longer distance. Secondly, it helps to close your eyes and focus on how it feels when you do have your wand and are summoning something. Each spell feels a little different as it moves through you when you cast it. And finally, imagine your wand coming toward your outstretched hand. You won't need partners for this, and I don't expect the younger students to even be able to do this, but it doesn't hurt to try."

After he finished explaining the technique, or what he knew of it, Severus felt slightly better. No one was expecting him to know how to do everything. He closed his eyes and focused on summoning his wand, calling out the charm, and opening his eyes just as he felt it might move toward him. The wand did, indeed, inch forward a little.

"Wow," breathed a second year Hufflepuff near him. "That's brilliant! I've seen Dumbledore do wandless magic, but he's.. he's really old."

A couple of others stopped working and stared. Severus wanted to instruct them to stop watching him and try to focus on learning the technique themselves, but perhaps a visual demonstration would help them. He hesitated, then tried again.

The wand moved farther this time. One of the Hufflepuff girls actually clapped.

"That's it, Severus!" she exclaimed. "Come on, you can do it!" She was smiling in anticipation.

More students stopped what they were doing and watched him. Severus took a step back, putting more distance between himself and the wand. He closed his eyes, stilled his breathing, and then tried to envision the wand flying directly into his hand.

Come on, he thought. You've just been unsuccessful so far this week because you've lost your confidence.

Exhaling, Severus opened his eyes, calling out, "Accio!"

The wand lifted from the floor and flew into his hand. He grabbed it firmly, shocked at the feat he had just accomplished. His face appeared uncertain, but then applause broke out around him. He found Lily's gaze in the crowd, and she was smiling proudly.

Feeling much better than he had in days, Severus felt his face relax into a small smile.

"You did it!" one of his Hufflepuff admirers chimed. "Now you can really teach us!"

Chapter Seventy-Two

As April faded into May, the season of spring gave way to warm days, nearly all of them sunny. Students from all four houses enjoyed day after day basking in the brilliant sunshine, and laughter and chatter could be heard around the lake. The seventh years were itching to be finished with their formal schooling, but the prospect of the N.E.W.T.s was daunting. Studying outside usually resulted in quickly losing concentration, and this included both Severus and Lily.

The duelling sessions continued to meet every Monday evening, and although learning wandless magic proved a gruelling technique, a few of the older students had managed to use the Summoning Charm effectively. Severus knew they were running out of time to devote to learning more spells, and so, he mainly focused on the wandless *Accio*, figuring a spell like that would come in handy on more than one occasion in the war.

Any problems in Slytherin were kept at bay for the time being. Severus's suspicions about Regulus and Masterson continued to grow, and since they weren't in his year, he didn't know if they were skiving off classes as well. He racked his brain, trying to remember if Regulus, especially, had been a Death Eater during his later tenure at Hogwarts. Knowing Regulus had been killed for supposedly trying to escape the ranks of Voldemort's followers the first time, Severus was inclined to believe that Regulus couldn't have had his heart entirely in the organization, but why, then, was he spending more time around Voldemort's junior supporters now?

Besides thoughts about Slytherin and life after school, Severus's mind drifted to the upcoming wedding. They had decided on a date in mid-August, figuring that would give them enough time to plan everything. Lily was content with a small wedding, but there had been some debate over whether a wizarding or Muggle ceremony would be preferred. Lily's parents and Tobias would have been invited to either, of course, but in the end, after several letters exchanged with her mum, Lily settled on a Muggle wedding. Her mum had already procured the neighborhood church they sometimes attended, and having the reception at Lily's house in the backyard would be simple and quaint.

Severus had already insisted on paying for the wedding, and when Lily inquired after how he could afford it, he finally admitted how he had paid for her ring and hence how he would pay for the wedding. His mother had left him with an inheritance, which had been left to her by her late parents. The Princes had been a well-off family, but they had more or less severed ties with their only daughter when she had married a Muggle. In spite of this, the family fortune had been given to her, although she had never mentioned it to Tobias. After Eileen's death, Severus had kept quiet about it, not wishing to touch the money. After careful consideration, however, he figured his mother would have approved of it being used for the one he loved, even if the rest of the Princes might be rolling in their graves.

Lily, feeling humbled with this knowledge, still tried to insist her family pay for the wedding, as it was tradition, but Severus would hear nothing of it. He gently argued that her family had more concerning financial matters, what with the medical bills. For now, the chemotherapy had stopped, and Mrs. Evans was being assessed to see if she needed further treatment.

Now, leaning against one of the trees by the lake, Severus had placed his Transfiguration textbook aside, and Lily's head was resting in his lap. His long fingers were aimlessly combing through her hair.

Lily's eyes were closed, and at his touch, combined with the feeling of the sun on her face, she murmured, "Mmm."

Severus released a contented sigh, glad his thoughts had turned from worries over Slytherin and the war movement to their wedding. It was something to look forward to in the midst of everything.

"I trust that feels good?" Severus inquired softly.

Lily opened her eyes and smiled. "Of course it does. I'll have to return the favor." She lifted her head off his lap and encircled his neck with her arms.

Leaning forward, Lily's lips caught his. Severus brought his hands to either side of her face, slowly working his way to the back of her head. His fingers played with the small curls at the base of her neck, wrapping the hair in tendrils around and between them. Shifting, Lily

continued to place kisses on his face, slowly lowering his head to her lap.

Releasing him from this sweet intoxication, Lily said, "See? You're now at my mercy." She grinned mischievously.

"Oh, really?" Severus asked dryly, smirking up at her, not minding the position one bit.

Lily nodded. "Uh-huh."

As promised, she gave Severus the same relaxing treatment he had bestowed upon her moments ago. She ran her fingers lightly through his fine, inch-long hair, occasionally capturing the ends between her fingers.

"Any word on your mum the past couple of days?" Severus posed.

"She's still stable. I'm hoping she's through with the treatments, but time will tell. Petunia is still taking care of her."

"Speaking of Petunia, are you still considering asking her to be your maid of honor?"

"I think... I think I will ask her once we return home for the summer," Lily said delicately. "Things are patched between us, but I haven't been in regular contact with her. Our short make up before the end of the Easter holiday was just a starting point, but... yes, I'd like to ask her. I had briefly considered Mary, but asking Petunia would be more meaningful. I hope she would take it as a sort of peace offering. I'm getting married before her, and she had been engaged before. She's still my sister, Sev, and I *really* want to try and make things work between us."

"Good," Severus replied. "From what you'd said a few months ago, it sounded like you thought otherwise. I know Petunia and I don't particularly like each other, but I knew you couldn't just abandon her."

Lily's smile faded, and she sobered. "Well, here's hoping."

Severus felt his eyelids becoming heavy, and as Lily leaned against the willow, she found her vision of the sky and lake before her blurring. The last time they had fallen asleep outside, they had been attacked, so forcing himself awake, Severus sat up and stretched.

Lily shook her head, saying, "Something about this warm weather makes me drowsy."

"It does feel rather like a lazy summer day," Severus remarked. "And to think, it's only May."

"Makes you wonder if the summer will be a scorcher," Lily stated.

Shrugging, Severus replied, "Perhaps we had better head back inside. The sun is starting to set." In his mind, however, Severus was thinking about the troublemaking Slytherins again. He was hoping to catch them tonight doing... whatever it might be they were doing.

"Aw, Sev, let's at least stay for the actual sunset," Lily protested, a mock pout on her face.

Severus easily gave in and smiled amusedly at her antics. "All right, but once the last sliver of sun has disappeared behind the horizon, we're going inside."

"Fair enough," Lily conceded.

Around them, students were returning to the castle. The hues cast by the sun deepened as they hit the tree tops and grass, and the lake grew darker. The sky was a vibrant red near the horizon, and higher, blue faded into the velvet blackness of night, the beginning of stars decorating the fabric amidst some gathering, thickening clouds. A couple of clouds close to the otherwise clear horizon took on a purplish quality, and there it was, all laid out before them like a masterpiece painting.

The sun lowered, and the closer it got to the horizon, the faster it disappeared, until finally, nothing was left. With the twilight to guide them, Severus and Lily stood and began to make their way back to the castle. Strolling along in companionable silence, they were the only two students left outside. That was, until Severus's eyes caught

a couple of shifting dark masses near a rarely used exit from the dungeons. He frowned, pulling Lily into the shadows of an overgrown shrub.

"Sev, what-?"

Severus placed a finger to his lips. "Shhh," he whispered. With a jerk of the head, he motioned toward the figures.

They watched as the two people stalked across the grounds, seemingly in a hurry, going toward the Forbidden Forest.

"What do we do?" Lily asked softly. "Who are they?"

"I have a feeling I know who they are," Severus hissed, glaring in the direction of the forest. "The question is: What are they doing?"

"We should inform Dumbledore," Lily whispered.

Normally, Severus would have agreed, but he was tired to reporting everything to the headmaster, only for the old man to deal out measly punishments.

"We're the ones out here witnessing them sneaking off the grounds," Severus tried to reason, making sure to keep his voice low. "If we go back inside, it'll only waste more time. You can inform the headmaster if you want, but I'm going to see what they're up to."

"Sev, no!" Lily protested. Realizing her voice was too loud, she whispered, "I'm not abandoning you ever again. If you're going after them, so am I."

Severus wanted to argue, to demand she return to safety, but Lily glared at him firmly. Knowing they were running out of time, Severus sighed. "All right, fine, but let me put a Disillusionment Charm on you first."

"And you?"

Severus withdrew his wand from his robes and cast the charm on Lily, then on himself. "It's done," he said. "Let's go."

Trying to stay in the shadows as much as possible, Severus and Lily worked their way toward the Forbidden Forest. As they moved, Severus was oddly reminded of Harry Potter and his disregard for the rules. How many times had he come down on the boy? And yet, here he was, out after dark, taking matters into his own hands. Severus tried to convince himself that he was breaking the rules because he was actually much older than student age, but taking Lily with him couldn't be justified as such. The further irony that the lessons he had been doling out were much like Harry's esteemed "Dumbledore's Army" didn't escape him.

Bloody hell, he thought. *I've become Potter and a Gryffindor*. He sneered at himself out of habit.

Realizing his thoughts had been drifting, Severus forced himself back to the present moment. He realized he wasn't the master at hiding and controlling his emotions and thoughts like he once had been, and glancing at the young woman at his side, he was pretty sure she had something to do with that. He was grateful Lily couldn't see his face in the dark, and with having to keep silent, she wouldn't inquire after his lack of speech.

They finally reached the edge of the forest. In the thick darkness, it was difficult to see anything, and it wasn't worth the risk of lighting their wands. Severus's keen eyes scanned the trees nearby, trying to catch a glimpse of movement. He heard a twig snap, and Lily froze next to him, gasping.

Out of instinct, Severus cupped a hand over her mouth and held a finger to his lips. He motioned with his wand toward the direction he had heard the noise. Both of them fixed their eyes there, and suddenly, a small light was shining between the trees. Severus didn't want to go too close, lest they make sounds of their own and alert the others.

He saw a pale blonde head above one of the black robes and knew who it had to be.

Malfoy, Severus thought.

Continuing to glare toward the small group, he ascertained about six people total. Since only two had come from the school, that meant at least four others had met them. Severus knew without a doubt that they were Death Eaters, and he was sure with one hundred percent accuracy that he could name the two who had come from the school.

Just then, the full moon peeked out between the clouds. The light illuminated those gathered there, and they put out their wands.

The full moon... Severus started to think, but before his sentence was complete, he heard a howl, and suddenly, the sound of a group of animals stampeding through the forest.

Knowing what was coming, Severus grabbed Lily, pulling her out of the way. Just as they sought cover among some low-lying shrubbery, a majestic stag, a great shaggy dog, and a silvery wolf ran past. Severus's heart was racing, and beside him, Lily watched in confusion and growing horror.

By now, the gathering of Death Eaters had heard the disturbance, and they had whipped out their wands defensively.

"Who's there?" one of them gruffly demanded.

"Shut up," Severus heard another of them hiss.

Severus turned his head, seeing the animals bounding directly toward the Death Eaters, the wolf who was Lupin first. The werewolf charged at the men, who, realizing the sudden danger they were in, Apparated away, leaving the two students behind. The two masses began running through the forest, but the dog and the stag headed off the wolf, blocking his path. Severus could no longer see them, but he heard the rustling of leaves as the animals fought on the ground, followed by the whimper of a dog. The cries of the terrified students came next, and Severus turned his head back toward the grounds, seeing the two boys running with all their might back toward Hogwarts.

"Come on," Severus hissed to Lily, grabbing her arm. "We need to get out of here."

Lily nodded, and together, they charged out of the forest and back onto the grounds. Severus ran ahead of Lily, but not too far, having no desire to leave her behind. He longed to catch up to those two shadows making their way across the grounds, but they were too far ahead. They had already gotten into the castle. Finally back on the path leading to the front doors, Severus and Lily slowed, panting. Once they reached the front steps, they collapsed onto them, catching their breath, the Disillusionment Charm wearing off.

"What was-? What just happened?" Lily asked. Thinking back to the time she had read about Lupin's condition in the infirmary, she swallowed, realization hitting her. "Was that *Remus*?"

Severus nodded. "Yes, and his little friends, Potter and Black."

"You mean, they're... Animagi?" Lily questioned incredulously.

"Yes, and it would seem they broke up whatever it was that was going on out there. I really wanted to find out what Masterson and Black... Regulus... were up to." Severus swore under his breath.

"Sev, it's dangerous," Lily almost begged. "What do you think you were going to be able to do? We need to tell Dumbledore-"

"Yes, I know," Severus said, now annoyed at himself and the Marauders. "We're likely to hear it for being out after dark, even if we are Head Boy and Girl."

Severus stood and offered his hand to Lily, who took it. Together, they walked up the stairs and into the castle.

Chapter Seventy-Three

Upon stepping into the Entrance Hall, Severus and Lily were greeted with silence and darkness. Only a few torches kept the hall dimly lit, and as they walked across the stone floor, their footsteps echoed off the walls, the empty space filled with the single sound. Severus kept his eyes locked straight ahead, wondering if he had been a fool to go into the Forbidden Forest. His disregard for the rules and for not remembering it was the night of the full moon could have resulted in Lily being harmed. As much as he disliked having to constantly run to Dumbledore in the face of a problem, as that had been his mission in his first life, Severus knew the headmaster had a right to know what was going on in his school.

When they finally reached their destination, Severus sighed and exchanged a glance with Lily.

"Well," he stated, "it's time to tell him."

Lily nodded. "Yes, it's best just to get it over with, Sev."

Not looking forward to what was about to ensue in Dumbledore's office, Severus warily gave the password to the gargoyle, who eyed them suspiciously, enquiring as to why they had come at a late hour. Normally, Severus would have argued with the idiot thing, but his resolve was gone right now. There were more pressing matters. He knew Dumbledore wouldn't be pleased with their behavior, but worse still was the fact that Death Eaters were congregating just beyond the boundaries of Hogwarts, and it was entirely possible that they had Death Eaters in their midst.

They stepped onto the staircase, and Lily asked softly, "Do you really think he would mark underage wizards?"

"I wouldn't put it past him," Severus muttered. Recalling his past life's school days, Severus knew of a couple of seventh years who had taken the mark over the Christmas holidays. Any question about anyone younger remained unclear.

They were now standing in front of the door. Severus knocked, closing his eyes, willing his breathing to stay calm. The door creaked open, and Dumbledore stood there, gazing back at them curiously.

"Good evening," he greeted them politely. "It is a rather late hour to be knocking at my office door. I trust something has happened?"

"Yes, sir," Severus said evenly.

Stepping aside, Dumbledore said, "Well, come in, then." Severus noticed immediately that Dumbledore wasn't his usual genial self. The old man seemed to sense that something was off.

Severus and Lily strode into the office, taking seats opposite the headmaster's behind his desk. Dumbledore took his seat a moment later, rested his elbows on the desk, and steeped his fingers, propping his chin thoughtfully on them. He surveyed the two students over his halfmoon spectacles.

"Go on, then," Dumbledore encouraged.

"Sir, we were-" Lily started to say, but Severus interrupted her.

"It was my idea, sir," he said. "We were outside watching the sunset, and once it was dark, we started heading in, but I saw two figures moving across the grounds toward the forest. I thought it looked suspicious, so I decided to investigate."

"I see," Dumbledore stated firmly. "And did you not think to return to the castle for your own safety and inform me or one of the teachers of what you had witnessed?"

"We should have," Lily replied quickly, not wanting Severus to take the full blame. "But the point is... We have reason to believe they were meeting up with followers of You-Know-Who, Death Eaters."

Severus frowned, gazing at Dumbledore.

"This is most troubling," Dumbledore said gravely. "Students are not permitted to leave the school grounds, especially since the attack in

Hogsmeade last year. Do you have any idea who these students might have been?"

"I'm pretty sure it was Regulus Black and Dennis Masterson," Severus said adamantly.

"Are you quite certain, Severus?" inquired Dumbledore shwerdly. "Did you get a clear look at their faces?"

"No, it was too dark, but perhaps Potter and Black might offer you a better explanation. They may have gotten close enough," Severus spoke, not realizing the implications of his revelation.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "You didn't mention you were with others besides yourselves."

"We were alone, sir," Lily explained, realizing Severus may have just given away a secret. She hadn't known of the Marauders' abilities to change into animals until less than an hour ago.

Severus swallowed nervously. As much as he didn't care for the Marauders, it hadn't been his intention to bring them into this and cause trouble, but then again, they *had* been wandering about the grounds at night as illegal Animagi.

"What exactly is going on? Please explain yourselves more clearly," Dumbledore said.

"You know I know about Lupin, Headmaster," Severus said carefully. "I also happen to know that... his friends are unregistered Animagi. I believe they transform when he transforms to keep him company. I hadn't realized it was the full moon until it was almost too late, but when a group of animals came bounding through the forest, we moved out of the way. They were headed straight toward the Death Eaters, who promptly Apparated away, leaving the two underage wizards to run back to the castle."

Dumbledore sighed. "I had my suspicions," he murmured, regarding the Marauders. If Dumbledore was surprised by how calm Lily appeared at this information, he didn't let it show. "I shall have to talk with James Potter and Sirius Black, then, and see if they can identify

the students. Starting first thing tomorrow morning, the rest of the staff and I are putting up a magical barrier, keeping students from going off the grounds. As for you two, as Head Boy and Head Girl, I must express my dissatisfaction at your disregard for the rules. Noble though your intentions might have been, what you risked was foolish. With a werewolf running through the forest on top of things, you were lucky you weren't attacked or infected. Mr. Potter and Mr. Black have acted recklessly as well, especially putting their friend in danger of harming others. Mr. Lupin cannot be held responsible for anything he may do when transformed."

Severus wasn't surprised by Dumbledore's disappointment. Lily felt guiltier than he did, but perhaps he had gone too far tonight. He had endangered Lily, and that was something he never wanted to do.

"And what if Potter and Black can't identify the suspects?" Severus posed.

"Then we will all have to keep our eyes open and our ears alert," Dumbledore replied.

"Can't you use Veritaserum on Black and Masterson, sir?" Severus asked harshly.

Dumbledore sighed and shook his head. "Veritaserum is highly regulated by the Ministry, Severus. I cannot simply go giving it to students, even if I am the headmaster."

Severus scowled.

"Displeased though you may be, Severus, it is late, and I trust you both to head straight to your rooms. I believe there has been enough trouble for one night."

"You're not going to punish us, sir?" Lily asked softly.

Stroking his beard thoughtfully, Dumbledore replied, "And what would you have me do, Lily? I suppose I could remove house points, give you detention... but seeing as you both will be graduating in a month and have already made it known that you stand for what is good and

right, what point would I be proving? I simply ask that you use more sense next time."

"And Potter and Black?" Severus questioned, shocked they were being let off easily.

"I shall treat them likewise," Dumbledore said, yawning. "Now, off with you."

Severus stood, Lily silently by his side. They left Dumbledore's office, not glancing back, and once they were in the corridor again, Lily released a sigh.

"I hope James and Sirius won't be too upset that we told him about their Animagi forms. I had no idea-

Severus shook his head. "Let them be angry. Dumbledore isn't going to expel them... or even punish them. I wish he would do something about Masterson and Black, though. I'm telling you, Lily; it had to be them."

They were walking down the hall down, speaking in hushed voices.

"But it could have been someone else," Lily pointed out. "I know they're suspects, but you don't know *for sure*, Sev. Let Dumbledore try to work things out. He's the headmaster, after all. You don't have to try to take responsibility for everything," she finished gently.

When they reached the point where they would need to part, Severus turned to face her. "I'll try," he replied softly. He leaned in and brushed her lips with a kiss. "Good night, Lily."

"Good night, Sev."

Her words seemed to hang in the air long after she turned and retreated down the long corridor, her footsteps disappearing, lingering with her words.

With a sigh, Severus headed for his room. Along the way, he kept alert for any sign of a student out after curfew. Turning a corner, he

heard a muffled sob. Pausing at the closest door, Severus leaned against it, listening.

Someone was definitely inside. Severus wondered if he ought to simply pretend no one was there and head to his room. Hadn't he already been through enough tonight?

But what if whoever's in there needs help? a small, niggling voice pestered.

Withdrawing his wand just in case he might need it, Severus's hand reached for the knob, shaking slightly. Turning the handle, the door creaked open a crack, and whoever was inside drew a sharp intake of breath. A hurried shuffling came from within the darkened closet, and Severus thought, *Lumos*.

The light from his wand fell on the face of the last person he expected to find hiding in a broom closet. The boy's face, lined with tears, rapidly changed, twisting his handsome features. He raised his wand, but whatever he was about to use on Severus, it was too late. Severus was faster and blocked him, then disarmed him. Fully stepping into the closet, Severus closed the door behind him, unable to step down now. He was already too far involved.

"Give me back my wand," the Slytherin boy said shakily.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Severus stated arduously. Not trusting the other boy, he flicked his wand at him, and ropes came out, snaking around his opponent, binding him.

"What are you doing?" the boy demanded. "If you want to capture me, why not just Stun me?"

"Because I wish to talk with you," Severus said, coming closer. "What are you doing in here, Black?"

"That's none of your bloody business, Snape," Regulus shot back. "I wasn't hurting anyone."

"You're out after curfew," Severus observed.

He wasn't going to mention his further suspicions. His dark eyes locked with Regulus's blue ones, probing his mind. Regulus was unsettled, violently twisting in the ropes, but he didn't seem to know what Severus was doing. Finding what he was looking for, Severus's suspicions confirmed, he roughly grabbed Regulus by the ropes just under his chin.

His breath was hot on Regulus's face as he spoke. "Are you one of them?"

"One of what?" Regulus asked, feigning stupidity.

Severus released him, letting him fall to the floor. He swished his wand at the left side of the ropes and forcefully withdrew Regulus's arm. He gruffly pushed the sleeve up past the elbow, holding Regulus's wrist in his palm. Burned against the pale skin was the faded outline of the Dark Mark. Severus immediately released the arm as if he had been burned. He stepped away, eyeing the other boy with disgust and distrust.

"H- how did you know about that?" Regulus whispered, now sounding very frightened.

"As you would so kindly tell me, it's none of your business, Black," Severus spat. "So, you are a Death Eater. Just wait until the headmaster finds out about this."

"Please!" Regulus suddenly pleaded, desperately trying to grab at Severus with his free hand. "I- I didn't know what I was getting myself into, I swear it! Over the spring holiday, I was initiated, but I- I don't want this anymore."

"Oh, really?" Severus asked skeptically. "You've had a small taste of what the Dark Lord is about, and now you don't like it?"

"You don't understand," Regulus said quickly. "My entire family supports him. Since my stupid older brother disgraced the family name and even went so far as to move out of the house, it's left to me to carry on the traditions. What do you have to worry about, you half-blood? By choosing to align yourself with Mud-"

"I *dare* you to say the word," Severus hissed, holding his wand to Regulus's neck.

"M- Muggleborns, then," Regulus hastily corrected, swallowing. "You're just setting yourself up for defeat, Snape. I might not want to be his servant, but at least I'll still be alive in a year, five years, ten years... He's gaining power like you wouldn't believe. The time has come to choose sides, and I've chosen the winning side."

Regulus was trying to speak with more fervor, more arrogance, but Severus was reminded of Draco during his sixth year at Hogwarts. The boy had been frightened and desperate, despite trying to hide behind the guise of his usual pompous, self-righteous attitude.

"Even though you don't want to be a part of it?" Severus shot harshly at him. "You're a coward, then. You would rather be a pawn than actually stand for what you believe in?"

"But I don't support what you stand for," Regulus pointed out.

Raising his eyebrows, Severus asked, "Then what are you going to do? You honestly think you will live another ten years? Good luck with that, Black. You are no safer than anyone else. If he finds out you no longer wish to serve him, you've already bought your grave plot."

Regulus was trembling, and against his will, the tears began to spill over again. "Just stop it, Snape. You've made your point clear."

"You will need to see Dumbledore," Severus said coldly. "I can graciously show you the way."

Keeping the ropes secured around Regulus, Severus opened the door, prodding Regulus to go ahead of him. Neither boy spoke the whole way. Once they were at the headmaster's office, Severus sighed, unable to believe he was back so soon. He went through the usual routine of giving the password and stepping onto the staircase. Once at the top, Severus knocked.

Dumbledore's face was staring back a few seconds later. He gazed questioningly at Severus, then at Regulus. Severus shoved Regulus toward the headmaster.

"A Death Eater for you, sir. Good night." Severus handed Regulus's wand to Dumbledore and retreated, leaving Regulus to his plight.

As he descended the stairs, Severus knew he should have kept his gaze straight ahead, but he chanced a glance over his shoulder, catching Regulus's scared eyes. A flicker of pity went through him as he entered the hall again.

"You'll be dead in two years, Regulus," he muttered to himself.

Chapter Seventy-Four

His footsteps felt heavy as Severus returned to his room that night. To see the desperation in Regulus's eyes staring back at him, the last shared moment imprinted on the canvas of his mind, left Severus wondering if he had done the right thing. Should he have tried to talk with the other boy more? But hadn't he tried to help the Slytherins, to keep them from turning Dark? He had never had anything against Regulus, but neither had they ever been particularly close.

Reflecting back on the past couple of years, Severus wondered if he should have tried to befriend Regulus. He was seldom one to reach out to others first, but knowing that Regulus had been killed before for wanting out, Severus couldn't pretend he didn't think there was something Regulus wasn't telling him, even now.

If anyone could understand what it felt like to regret joining the Death Eaters, it was Severus, and what had he done? He had barely given the frightened boy a chance before thrusting him over to Dumbledore. Would Dumbledore be merciful? Chances were the old man wouldn't extend any mercy without strings attached. Severus didn't know if Regulus had anything to offer the headmaster in return, and what did Dumbledore have to trust Regulus on? Unless Regulus had accidentally betrayed the love of his life and was wishing his own life over, Severus couldn't imagine Dumbledore would be convinced. After all, Dumbledore focused on the power of love, and he had spent years holding sway over Severus because of Severus's love for Lily.

Severus eventually managed to fall asleep, but dreams of flashing green light and piercing eyes, which turned from red to blue to green to black, but in no particular order, plagued his slumber. When Severus awoke the following morning, he absently went through the process of cleaning and dressing.

He headed down to the Great Hall aimlessly, and much to his surprise, Regulus was seated at the Slytherin table. He was off by himself and was staring at the untouched plate of food on the table. Severus turned his head away, surprise and an odd sense of relief coursing through him. While it was true that Regulus was a Death Eater, he hadn't actually done any harm to anyone in the school... yet.

Everyone else who had been expelled had used an Unforgivable on another student, but still, Severus wondered what had transpired in Dumbledore's office last night. If Regulus was still sitting here, he was still welcome at the school. Severus's eyes locked on Dumbledore for a lingering moment, and Dumbledore caught Severus's gaze and held it. Severus thought he saw the headmaster incline his head ever so slightly.

Severus returned his gaze to the students sitting at his table. Masterson was there, of course, and Severus had to resist the urge to scowl. He didn't trust the boy, and if Regulus was allowed to stay at Hogwarts, chances were Masterson would be as well, especially since he hadn't been discovered *for certain* as being one of the students out on the grounds last night convening with Death Eaters. Masterson was only a fifth year, so he was probably too young to be recruited. As ruthless and evil as Voldemort was, Severus didn't think he would mark an underage wizard. Regulus was freshly seventeen, so Voldemort had wasted no time in welcoming him to the ranks.

Breakfast passed uneventfully after the initial realization of Regulus's continued stay at Hogwarts. Severus's first class that day was Potions, which he looked forward to because he was able to sit next to Lily. Once finished with his meal, Severus met Lily in the Entrance Hall, and they descended the stairs to the dungeons.

"I have something I need to tell you later," Severus muttered, not wishing to be overheard, as unlikely as that seemed with the loud chatter all around him.

Lily cast him a quizzical glance, then nodded. She wondered what it could possibly be, but whatever important information Severus had to share with Lily, it would be waiting until classes were over and they could go somewhere private.

"You should know, Sev," Lily said back just as softly, "that Dumbledore already talked with James and Sirius. They didn't get a clear look at the students who were with the Death Eaters, either."

"Oh?" Severus inquired curiously. They entered the classroom.

"Yes," Lily confirmed. "But also, they aren't too happy about their secret being let out of the bag."

Severus snorted, taking his seat. "Well, how long did they expect to keep it quiet? Did Dumbledore do anything?"

Lily shook her head. "If he didn't punish us, he surely wasn't going to punish them. He did warn them not to go out after dark again, though. He was displeased that they were potentially endangering others by letting Remus roam freely in his altered state."

Before Severus could reply, the individuals who were the topic of their conversation walked into the room. James and Sirius weren't joking around like they usually did, and just behind them, Remus appeared tired. Black circles decorated the area around his eyes, and he had a fresh scratch mark on his cheek. Remus proceeded to his bench sullenly, shaking his head perceptibly.

Not a moment after James and Sirius had placed their bags on their bench did they approach Severus and Lily. James looked remarkably stern, and Sirius had his arms folded across his chest, hoping to appear menacing.

"So, you thought it would be amusing to rat us out, did you, Snape?" James asked.

"What a way to thank us after we probably saved you from those Death Eaters," Sirius added. He glared from Severus to Lily, but James kept his eyes locked solely on Severus.

"What did you expect us to do?" Severus hissed. "We had to inform the headmaster of what we had seen, and that included you. We thought you might have seen who the conspirators were, but I was obviously mistaken. As for 'probably saving us', Black, don't take the credit for something you didn't do."

"Well, thanks to you, our secret is out," James shot back.

Sirius was silenced for the time being.

"And I suppose discussing it in a classroom that it soon to be filled with several other students is helping that fact?" Severus asked sardonically.

Lily giggled, despite the seriousness of the situation. "I'm sorry, James... Sirius. I already told you we didn't mean to get you in trouble. Dumbledore wasn't any happier with us, but he didn't *do* anything to any of us. Besides, you shouldn't have been running around like that for the past several years, anyway."

Remus was gazing in their direction, clearly unhappy. He was on the verge of leaving his seat to intervene when a group of Ravenclaws stepped into the classroom. James looked from them to Severus and retreated.

Sirius stood there a few seconds longer, and just when Severus thought he might leave, Sirius leaned over and whispered, "You might think you're the golden boy, Snape, but I still don't entirely trust you. You'd do anything to make yourself look good at the expense of others."

"Look who's talking, Black," Severus replied, nonplussed. "Your advice would be better suited on your own kin."

"What are you talking about?"

"You don't know?" Severus asked smoothly, enjoying the rise he was provoking in the Gryffindor boy.

"Severus," Lily muttered warningly.

Sighing, Severus backed down. "Fine. You and your esteemed brother ought to have a little chat. That's all I'm saying." Beside him, Lily was watching him, perplexed and curious.

Slughorn chose that moment to make his grand entrance, jovially bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Ah, Mr. Black, do kindly take your seat," Slughorn intoned. "We have a wonderful lesson ahead of us today, and I would hate for you to miss it."

Sirius gave Severus one last glare and took his seat. Severus sneered at the back of his retreating form and then averted his attention to the lesson.

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After classes were over for the day, Severus and Lily met in their broom closet, seeing as it was the only private place they could talk. Severus made sure to cast a Silencing Charm on the place. It wouldn't do to be overheard.

Severus was already sitting on the floor when Lily entered. "This had better not take too long," Lily said. "It's a nice day outside, and I had hoped to spend it with you."

Sighing, annoyed, Severus replied, "You think I enjoy being inside a dark closet any more than you do, Lily?"

Closing the door behind her, Lily stated matter-of-factly, "I suppose that depends what's going on inside said broom closet." She smirked.

Severus allowed himself a small smile at her joke, then sobered. "If I seem on edge, there's a good reason for it. After you and I parted last night, I was on my way to my room when I overheard someone inside a closet very much like this one. They were apparently crying, and seeing as I am Head Boy, I felt it necessary to see what the problem was. Much to my surprise, Regulus Black was inside the cupboard."

Lily's eyes were huge as her mouth gaped. "What? Why would Regulus Black be crying inside a broom closet?"

"Apparently," Severus continued, lowering his voice, "because he regrets his decision."

"You mean- he joined the Death Eaters?" Lily asked incredulously.

Severus nodded, proceeding to explain the conversation he had had with Regulus. "I took him to Dumbledore and left it to him from there," he finished.

"But Regulus was still at breakfast and lunch today," Lily pointed out. "Why wasn't he expelled?"

"That's a good question, and I'm still trying to figure that out myself," Severus said with a shrug.

"Hmm, well, what do we do now?" Lily posed.

"We?" Severus echoed. "Lily, there's nothing more we should be doing but our jobs as Head Boy and Girl. I think we've already caused enough trouble."

"Severus, what are you talking about?" Lily asked, sounding a bit hurt. "You were all ready to break the rules last night when you insisted on sneaking out after dark and following those Death Eaters. Why the sudden change?"

"And are you forgetting what could have happened to you, Lily?" Severus ejected. "Lupin is a werewolf, and if it isn't bad enough that his friends are reckless enough to run rampant with him, putting ourselves in harm's way is a folly I could have avoided. If anything had happened to you-"

"Severus, I can take care of myself," Lily replied hotly.

"I never said you couldn't," Severus argued. He was bothered immensely by last night's events, and the combined guilt of not helping Regulus when he had the chance and of putting Lily in potential danger was putting Severus's emotions over the cliff of reason. "I just- Lily, please! I was acting rashly and without thinking. There are other ways of helping the cause of what's right that don't involve you coming to harm."

"And what about you, Severus?" Lily shot back. "You think I wouldn't be heartbroken if something were to happen to you? When we're done at Hogwarts, I know you won't back down and let this all go. You're already too involved; we're *both* involved up to our eyeballs. I know you better than anyone else, and I know that once you get something in your head, you won't let it go. You can't blame yourself for other people's choices! If Regulus wanted to be a Death Eater,

then that's his decision. You adamantly chose *not* to be one. He could have done the same if he had half the courage you do!"

"Lily, you don't know what it's like to be in Slytherin," Severus protested. "Do you have *any* idea how hard I had to fight to not become one of them? It took me *years* to realize what I'd lost-"

"Years?' And what do you mean by what you'd lost? Sev, you didn't lose anything. You might have wound up continuing down that path, but you didn't, and it's only been a few years, not years and years like you make it seem..." Lily trailed off, her voice growing softer. She took her hands and held his face. She gazed into his eyes. "Severus, is there something you want to tell me?"

Severus stared back, transfixed, and swallowed. He remembered the last breath he had taken in his past existence, Harry's eyes fading, and now Severus stood on the precipice of truth and lies, life and death. A second or an eternity could have passed.

"No," he finally croaked.

Lily sighed, dropping her hands, and withdrew. Severus felt his chest constrict, feeling her evident disappointment. He hated to lie, but what could he do? Telling Lily the truth now would destroy everything he had worked so hard for the past two years, or so he felt. He mustered the strength to draw close to her and take her face in his hands now.

"I'm sorry if I seemed unreasonable a few minutes ago, Lily," Severus apologized. "I just don't want to do anything I might regret, and I don't think I've been thinking as clearly as I ought to be lately. You're right; after school, our lives will be ours to live as we choose, and I won't let the world around us be forgotten. I used to think I could have you all for myself, and we could live in some fairytale representation of reality, but I've known better for a long time now. Those are the dreams of a child. We have to live *in* the world."

"Yes, and the only way that world is going to be better is if we do our part to help," Lily agreed.

"And we will," Severus asserted. "Lily, I love you."

"I love you, too, Sev. You know that. Even when we argue." She managed a small smile.

"Even when we argue, huh?" Severus quipped, his softer side returning. He actually laughed, something he didn't think he would have done not so long ago after coming down from such an intense conversation.

Or was it his way of pushing real concerns to the back of his mind?

Severus chose to bask for the moment in the assurance that Lily was beside him. After a few minutes, they left the broom closet and headed outside. To an onlooker, the illusion of the beautiful spring day before them was just that: an illusion.

In the weeks to follow, that illusion continued, but Severus never forgot the pleading look in Lily's eyes that day in the closet. He never forgot the dejection in Regulus's eyes. Nor the piercing quality of Dumbledore's blue orbs. Or even the red that still haunted him as Voldemort had gazed at him time and again in his other life.

And there were his own black eyes. Looking at himself, there was no illusion in Severus's mind. He knew where he stood, and that was a scary place atop that cliff.

Author's Note: A big thank you to everyone who voted in the polls! They are finished for now, but there may be future ones. I'll let you know! The next chapter will be approaching the end of the school year and then graduation. That point will mark the halfway point of my story. I thank you all so much for reading, reviewing, and sharing your thoughts/concerns/ideas with me!

Real life has been very busy lately, and it will continue to be, but my hope is to continue to update at least twice a week. I hold myself to that, and don't worry - I never, ever abandon a story! This story, although insanely long, will be finished one day (I'm aiming for the end of this year!).

Chapter Seventy-Five

With June came the approaching of the inevitable N.E.W.T.s, which would mark the end of Severus and Lily's tenure at Hogwarts. In the last weeks of school, Regulus had been quiet and subdued, choosing to be alone instead of with Masterson and the others. Ever since Dumbledore had ensured the school would be better protected, no student had been able to leave the grounds, and Severus would often find Masterson and his crowd sulking in the common room when most other students were outside enjoying the warm, summer weather.

Good news from Lily's home continued to come in weekly owl post. Her mum's condition remained stable, and Violet Evans reported she was feeling better. Her hair was starting to grow back, and her energy level was increasing. Lily's smile grew wider, if that were possible, with each positive bit of news she received.

That morning, it thankfully being a Saturday, the last one before the N.E.W.T.s, Severus was standing in front of the mirror in his private bathroom, buttoning up a green shirt. His hair was long enough to rest on his forehead, nearly touching his eyebrows. Before long, he realized he would need to brush it out of his eyes. Checking himself over, he exited the bathroom and headed to the Great Hall for breakfast.

He took his usual seat, not too far from Rose and Emily, who had become somewhat like friends to him. He certainly didn't share anything deep or private with them, but there was a comradery among them and a few others in Slytherin. Severus scanned the hall for Lily, but she hadn't yet arrived. His eyes travelled down the table and briefly stopped on Regulus, who abruptly glanced up from his sausages and eggs. The other boy glared distrustfully at Severus and returned to picking at his food.

Sighing, Severus lifted the cup of coffee to his lips and took a sip. He was one of the few students who preferred drinking coffee at breakfast to pumpkin juice or tea.

"How do you stand that stuff?" Rose suddenly asked.

Severus looked at the coffee swirling in his cup as he placed it on the table. He shrugged. "Acquired taste, I suppose," he said lazily. "I didn't like it at your age, either."

"Hmmm, well, my mum drinks it. It smells good, but that's about it."

"My mum drank coffee as well," Severus returned, realizing he was probably revealing more about his personal life than usual. Not one for small talk, he hoped Rose would leave him alone.

She didn't.

"N.E.W.T.s are this week, right?"

Severus gave a single nod.

"And then you're graduating," she said, her voice trailing off quietly. Beside her, Emily turned her eyes to Severus.

"Yes," Severus stated. "You've known this."

"What she's getting at is: Who will teach us when you're gone?" Emily posed.

"You will have your usual professors," Severus pointed out.

"It's not the same, Severus," Rose said sadly. "You were... a really great teacher. Why don't you come back in the autumn? Can you apply for a position?"

"I'm not planning on going into teaching," Severus replied, feeling hot.

"That's a shame," Emily murmured.

Severus gazed at their dejected faces and wondered if he would really be that missed. No student had ever told him he was a great teacher before, except for suck ups like Draco Malfoy. It was a world of difference coming from Rose and Emily, though. They were sincere, and from the expression on their long faces, Severus realized he must have had a larger impact on them than he had realized.

"Will you really miss those lessons so much?" Severus asked.

"Yes, and we'll miss you," Emily replied.

Rose nodded. "It won't be the same, even if someone else takes over."

"I'm sorry," Severus said truthfully. "But we have one more lesson yet. It's not goodbye yet."

Not overly satisfied, Rose and Emily gave him a pair of nods and resumed eating. Severus ate his breakfast, contemplating Monday's lesson. He decided to make it special.

Just then, Lily entered and sat next to Mary. He was looking forward to discussing his plans for Monday's last duelling club with her after breakfast.

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Monday was the first day of N.E.W.T.s. The morning consisted of the written part of Charms, and the afternoon was all practical. By dinner, the seventh years were mentally and physically exhausted. Severus ate more quickly than usual, hoping to get to the empty classroom early. Lily and he had already agreed to meet there a half hour before the duelling club was scheduled to begin.

Once he was in the abandoned classroom, Severus carefully checked to ensure everything was as he had left it the day before. After realizing students would miss these sessions, Severus decided to make their last meeting one to remember. Lily and he had already discussed the details of their plan on Saturday.

When Lily entered a couple of minutes later, she asked, "Is everything still on?"

Nodding, Severus said, "Yes." He glanced around, then asked, "How do you think you did today?"

Lily shrugged nonchalantly. "Charms is easy enough. How about you, Sev?"

"Probably not as well as you did, but then again, you already were brilliant at the subject. Too much frivolous wand-waving for my tastes." Severus wrinkled his nose distastefully.

Laughing at his antics, Lily stated, "Well, not *all* spells are for defense, Sev. Tomorrow is Potions, so you'll get a break. You probably didn't even have to study."

That much was true, but he wasn't going to elaborate. Shrugging much in the same manner Lily had a minute ago, Severus said, "I'll be glad when the next couple of weeks are over."

"It's hard to believe, isn't it?" Lily questioned. "It's almost the end of our time at Hogwarts. Kind of sad, really. This was seven years of our lives, and the eleven years before that are blurry. It feels like we've always been here. To be leaving, I don't know, it's just... strange."

Severus tried to reflect on how he had felt the first time around. He remembered the excitement of joining ranks with the Death Eaters, of finally proclaiming his rightful place and of proving he would be somebody. How ridiculous those thoughts felt now. Severus knew what his first life had become, and he had hated every minute of it.

Forcing himself back to the present, Severus said, "It's not over quite yet. Besides, you and I have much to celebrate this summer." He smiled, coming to Lily and wrapping an arm around her waist.

Thinking of their upcoming wedding, Lily smiled at her fiancé. "Indeed, we do," she agreed.

Just then, the door opened, and Severus and Lily released each other. The Marauders strolled into the room, laughing over some ludicrous joke. Lily bit her lip, trying not to laugh herself, but Severus merely rolled his eyes at their display.

"You're early," Severus remarked.

"So are you," James returned. "Why? Did we interrupt something private?"

"A snog session instead of a duelling session, perhaps?" Sirius teased.

Remus groaned.

"Hilarious, as always," Severus said dryly. "You two have a career in comedy after Hogwarts."

"He finally appreciates our wonderful sense of humor, did you hear that, mate?" Sirius asked James.

"I must be Confunded," James joked.

"Don't mind them," Remus said, coming to stand closer to Severus and Lily. "What d'you have planned?"

"That's a surprise, Remus," Lily replied, smiling and eyeing Severus mischievously.

"Did you say a surprise?" James inquired.

"Yes, Potter, a surprise," Severus said softly. "Seeing as it bears repeating for it to penetrate your thick head-"

"Better a thick head than a greasy one," James said smoothly.

No wands were drawn, and no tempers broke. By now, the offhand remarks sparred between Severus and the Marauders were taken in stride.

A few others entered, and before they knew it, everyone had arrived. Severus gazed upon the mixed expressions on the kids. Some wore anticipatory faces, others more saddened, knowing this was, in fact, their last duelling session.

An unexpected surge of warmth passed through Severus in that moment, and realization struck him at how proud he truly was of every student in front of him. Never as a proper teacher had he felt this way - that sense of worth and reward for preparing the next generation of young minds. Severus smiled, and much to his amazement, some of the kids appeared unnerved at this.

He laughed.

"I should tell you," Severus explained, finding his words, "that this year has been hectic, mentally draining, and sometimes even downright a pain in the arse, but you all have proven yourselves devoted... You cared enough to come back, despite all odds, and you've taught me something. I-" Severus paused, knowing he was blushing. He wasn't accustomed to expressing his feelings to others, with the notable exception of Lily. James and Sirius was gaping at him as if he had just stepped off a spaceship, perhaps a Jedi in the famous Star Wars movie.

Lily stepped closer to him and took his hand. "What Severus is trying to say is thank you," she amended. "And for that, we would like to celebrate our success together. It's the end of the year, and you've all worked very hard. You should be proud of yourselves. Without further delay, let's party."

The stunned looks she received broke into smiles, and then clapping ensued. Lily guided Severus to reveal the hidden food, and within moments, butterbeers were being passed around. A plethora of sweets littered the unused desks lining the one wall, and the students rushed forward with vigor and enthusiasm, snatching the food into their greedy hands. An energy filled the room that hadn't existed five minutes before, and Severus relaxed, watching the students take full advantage of the party.

A multitude of thanks were expressed, but Severus was quiet and modest. Lily kept squeezing his hand, as if to reassure him that this wasn't a dream.

As the hour passed, the chatter lessened. Severus wondered what was going on when the kids assembled and came to stand in front of Lily and him.

"We just wanted to say," Rose expressed for everyone, "that you'll be missed. And thank you for all you've done, Severus and Lily."

"You- you're welcome," Severus replied, unable to formulate a lengthier response. "I suppose I should say now: This session is

dismissed." He managed a modest smile, and a mixture of laughter and clapping broke out.

The daze of being appreciated and liked kept Severus mentally floating through the rest of the evening. There had been glimpses, small moments in the vast expanse of time, when Severus had felt such gratitude during his seventh year, but in the end, he came to the realization that he had gained so much more than just Lily.

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Two oppressive weeks of N.E.W.T.s somehow managed to pass. If Severus had thought the O.W.L.s challenging two years ago, he felt those examinations would have been a vacation in a tropical paradise compared to the Nastily Exhausting Wizarding Tests, as they were aptly named. Two years of magical education didn't help, but he knew he had excelled in the two subjects that meant the most to him. He had more than passed the others, to be sure, but still, that didn't change the fact that Severus was now relieved to be on the other end of that arduous fortnight.

He now stood in the room he had come to call his own this past year. He placed one last shirt in his trunk and checked the drawers and wardrobe one more time to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything.

Gazing somberly at the now barren room, Severus knew he wouldn't forget Hogwarts, the place which had been his home for most of his life. Despite the loquacious activity among his peers of saying their final farewells to the old place, Severus's heart was strangely sorrowful. He turned from the room and dropped a heavy foot into the hall.

Closing his eyes against the backdrop of years combined into undefinable happiness and the lowest level of melancholy, Severus made his way toward the Great Hall. He placed his trunk with the others and joined his table for breakfast. He reflected on the Leaving Feast from the night before...

The Great Hall was decorated for the end of the year feast, and before them, the tables filled with all sorts of delicious delights. Severus suddenly realized how hungry he was as he eyed the food,

but before anyone could begin eating, Dumbledore stood and gave his annual speech.

"What a year we have had," he spoke regally. "My congratulations to all the houses for a combined effort on house unity. It is only fitting that we celebrate this victory and award the House Cup to the entire school, I think." Smiling, Dumbledore applauded, which was joined in strength by the whole hall erupting in cheers. When the students had quieted enough, Dumbledore continued, "In the midst of a war, this is exactly what I had hoped for. I extend my gratitude, on behalf of the entire staff, to our Head Boy and Head Girl, especially, for making this happen."

Severus was stunned. He reddened and found Lily gazing back at him, just as shocked. People clapped again, and Severus half-smiled, giving a nod of acknowledgement.

"Very well, then," Dumbledore concluded. "Tuck in and enjoy this marvelous feast!"

The dinner was every bit as wonderful as expected. After the meal, Severus and Lily had spent one last night outside around the lake, watching the sun set in the western horizon, the sky more beautiful than the Great Hall's illusion.

Returning to the present, Severus finished breakfast, the atmosphere buzzing with excitement. The summer holiday was moments away, and only the seventh years would be coming back to Hogwarts in a week's time for graduation. The others would be back in September.

Meeting Lily by the door, Severus escorted her across the grounds. They opted to take the train home for old time's sake, and as they walked, Lily glanced over her shoulder at the castle behind them.

"At least we get to come back one more time," she said. "Graduation on the grounds will be wonderful. Mum and Dad will finally be able to see where I've gone to school all these years."

"I hadn't thought about whether or not I'd ask my father to come," Severus admitted.

Lily thought Severus sounded uncomfortable, but taking his hand, she said, "While that's up to you, Sev, I think he'd love to see your graduation. You've worked hard, harder than most, to get where you are."

Severus nodded absentmindedly, his eyes focusing on the Hogwarts Express parked at the station. He looked behind him, seeing Hogwarts obscured through the forest. Determinedly, Severus's grip on Lily's hand tightened, and they stepped onto the platform.

"For now, we'll go home," Severus stated, "and we'll take it from there."

Lily reached up and caressed his cheek, then leaned in and kissed him. All around them, students were anxiously boarding the train. A few of them stopped to watch the public display of affection, but to Severus and Lily, they were in their own world now.

Their future awaited them.

Chapter Seventy-Six

The shadows shifted and grew long as the sun was embraced by the western sky. The train's engine released one last puff of steam, and the wheels screeched to a halt. The compartments filled with rustling as students stood and grabbed their bags off the shelves above the seats, and the general chatter grew louder as doors opened. Excited eyes and fresh smiles greeted both parent and child on the platform.

Severus hitched his bag over his shoulder and held his trunk deftly in the other hand, following Lily down the narrow aisle. They found the first door and exited the train, joining countless others on Platform 9 3/4. In the hubbub of the masses, Lily and Severus scanned the crowd for her parents.

"There!" Lily exclaimed, pointing.

Standing beyond most others gathered close to the train were Violet, Ross, and Petunia. Lily rushed toward her family, happy to see Petunia had joined them, and Severus followed just behind her, purposefully giving her some space to greet her family first.

The first thing Severus noticed upon seeing Lily hug her mum was that Violet looked much healthier. Although still quite thin, her cheeks no longer appeared so hollow. Gone was the ashen complexion and the dark circles around her lively eyes, and just as Lily had said, her mum's hair was starting to grow back.

"Welcome home, Lily, darling," Violet was saying, tears in her eyes.

"Oh, Mum," Lily replied, her voice full of emotion. "You are wonderful."

After the reunion ended between mother and daughter, Lily went on to exchange a hug with her father, and then she and Petunia awkwardly embraced. Severus stood to the side for a while, not wishing to intrude, but he was quickly, kindly admonished by Violet for his behavior.

"Severus, dear," Violet beckoned. "Don't stand there all alone. I expect a hug from the young man who is to be my son in a few short weeks."

Severus felt his cheeks grow hot as he stepped toward her. Offering Violet a smile, Severus said, "It's good to see you, Mrs. Evans."

"I'll have no more of this 'Mrs. Evans' nonsense," Violet sweetly protested. "It's to be 'Mum' or at the very least 'Violet.'"

Severus nodded, unsure of what to say, but he didn't have to concern himself overly much with finding words, for Violet was embracing him thoroughly, passing him on to Ross, who shook his hand fondly and chuckled.

"You might as well get used to it, Severus," Ross said good-naturedly. "Vi is persistent, and when she says something, it goes." He gazed at his wife affectionately.

Violet laughed the remark off, and turning his eyes to Lily again, Severus saw that Lily was in a conversation with Petunia. Petunia appeared shocked and oddly pleased.

They collected their things and made their way to the car. Once inside, Severus cast Lily a quizzical look. Crammed in the backseat, Lily in the middle, Severus tried to discern Petunia's expression, but Petunia was busy staring out the window.

Once her parents were in the car, Lily announced, "Petunia is going to be my maid of honor." She smiled and looked at her sister.

Petunia reddened and gave a modest smile, very uncharacteristic for her... at least Severus thought.

"That's wonderful!" Violet exclaimed. "Oh, and, Lily, there's something else I've been meaning to ask you. Instead of having the ceremony in the neighborhood church, what do you think of having it in our backyard? The weather is lovely in the summer."

"Well..." Lily hesitated, glancing at Severus for his input. "I don't mind. I like the idea, but what do you think, Sev?"

"Anything you plan is fine with me," Severus said. "I know next to nothing about planning a wedding, so I'm leaving that up to you."

Ross chuckled. "That's the spirit, Severus. We men are clueless when it comes to that sort of thing. I keep trying to tell you that, Vi."

Violet shrugged. "I should like to have your father over for dinner some time as well, Severus," she suddenly stated.

If Severus had been drinking something, he would have spit it out. "W-what?" he sputtered. "Why?"

As much as he got on well with his father nowadays, Severus wasn't overly keen on the idea of his father mingling with Lily's parents.

"Why not?" Violet challenged.

"It's just..." Severus trailed off, losing his words. He wasn't accustomed to having to explain himself around others, let alone a group of people. With Petunia there, he was even more uncomfortable. Severus tugged at his collar, suddenly feeling hot.

Picking up on his discomfort, Lily interjected, "We'll see, Mum. Sev would need to ask his dad first. Right, Sev?"

Severus gave her a thankful smile. After that, the conversation steered away from the wedding, for which Severus was eternally grateful.

x x x x x

A couple of days after returning to Spinner's End, Severus went to visit his father. Not having seen Tobias in several months, Severus was pleased to find him still doing well. They were now sitting on a bench in front of the flat complex, the lilting breeze gently playing with the tree branches above them, the placid cadence of the numerous leaves murmuring in their ears.

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you, Father," Severus said.

Tobias gazed expectantly at his son. "Yes?" he prompted.

"As you know, the wedding is about six weeks away, and tradition holds that the groom needs a best man. I realize this may sound like a strange request, but would you consider being my best man, Father?" Severus posed carefully.

That hadn't been an easy question for Severus to ask. He had deliberated for the past many weeks. Knowing he didn't have any close male friends didn't help matters any, and while he considered Ross Evans more of a father to him than his own natural father, Ross would be giving his daughter away. Severus would have felt it inappropriate to take away from that special bond between a father and his beloved daughter.

Watching Tobias now, Severus kept him composure calm. He may not have a particularly close relationship with this man, and their history certainly was against them, but that didn't mean Severus couldn't hope for a better future.

"I am... I am humbled by your request, Severus," Tobias uttered meekly, his eyes unable to meet those of his son. Staring at his hands as they fumbled in his lap, Tobias continued, "Are you sure? You know I haven't been a good father to you, let alone truly the 'best man' in your life."

"I know it's difficult, Father," Severus admitted. "It's been difficult on both of our parts, but I've given this much thought, and yes, I am sure. I wouldn't have asked if I hadn't meant it."

Tobias breathed in deeply and exhaled slowly, bringing his gaze to his son. "Then yes, I will, Severus. Thank you." His thin lips hitched into a smile.

Not sure how to respond, Severus changed the subject. "There are a couple of more things I need to ask you. Lily's parents wanted to have us over for dinner some time this week to finally get the chance to properly meet you, and my graduation ceremony is this upcoming Saturday. Should you come, you would be able to see where I've gone to school. The enchantments that hid it from Muggles are lifted for the families of students that day."

Tobias, not used to being asked to be a part of something, felt much the same way Severus often did when in a similar situation. "I, uh... s-sure, Severus," he replied, surprised and yet with an undercurrent of unease.

Empathetic toward his father, Severus half-smiled. "I know it's a lot to take in, but I *do* want you in my life, Dad, and what's important to me, the wedding and the graduation, those are things I want you to be a part of."

Stunned at his admission, Severus's cheeks turned a light red.

"I will do my best to be fitting of the title you're asking me to take in your wedding, then," Tobias replied.

Above their heads, the wind continued to play out its rhythmic dance with the trees. The peace settled inside them, around them, and beyond them. For now, Severus could have a moment of bliss, and Lily didn't need to be there.

x x x x x

The Friday evening before graduation, Severus waited anxiously in his house for his father to show before they would walk over to the Evanses' house. He checked himself over one last time in the mirror before heading downstairs. He hoped Tobias would be presentable, as his father still had a tendency to think it all right to parade around in sweatpants and a T-shirt.

When a knock issued forth from the door, Severus unlatched it and found Tobias waiting on the stoop. Severus almost didn't recognize him. He was completely clean-shaven, and his hair was clean and brushed back from his face, longish tendrils curling behind his ears. He had on a pair of brown trousers and a beige button-down, collared shirt.

"Hello, Father," Severus greeted him. "Do you need to come in for anything, or should we just go now?"

"I'm fine," Tobias replied. "I made sure to use the loo before coming over." He smiled at his attempt at humor, to which Severus inwardly

groaned, hoping Tobias would refrain from such comments at the Evanses'.

"All right, then," Severus said. "Let me just lock up, and we'll be on our way."

Stepping outside, Severus secured the door, and together, father and son strolled down the front walk to the street.

"The old neighborhood looks the same," Tobias remarked, taking in the litter lining the curbs and the dirty river just beyond.

"As lovely as always," Severus stated sarcastically. "I think you'll find Lily's house much nicer."

"I never could afford a decent house," Tobias said softly, sounding ashamed.

Realizing he may have hit a sensitive subject, Severus amended, "It's fine, Father. The house suits me just fine."

"And what of when you're married?" Tobias asked curiously.

"I offered Spinner's End to Lily as our home. It would keep us close to her family. I haven't told you this before, but her mum is in remission from cancer. Please don't bring it up, though."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Tobias said sincerely, "but don't worry, I won't say anything."

They walked along in silence, passing the park where Severus and Lily had played as kids... and where Tobias had spent many a homeless night on a bench. Severus felt his chest clench as Tobias's gaze turned to one of the benches, but what could he say? Bringing up the past would only open old wounds.

Then, Severus remembered promising his father something: that he could move back into Spinner's End should he clean up and prove he could stay that way. It now had been many months since Tobias had stopped drinking, but Severus would be married soon, and as he had just told his father, he had also promised the house to Lily.

Guiltily, Severus suddenly said, "Father, I... I know I told you last year you could return home if you stopped drinking-

Knowing where Severus was going, Tobias shook his head. "Don't worry yourself on it, Severus. It's all right. I have my flat, and that is now my home. I wouldn't want to intrude."

Partly relieved his father understood, Severus still felt poorly for making a promise he hadn't kept. He would have offered the house to his father and found something else with Lily had Tobias objected.

"Well, should anything ever happen, you may return," Severus stated firmly.

"Are you talking about this wizard war, Severus?"

"Yes, but that's not the only thing, Father. You already know it's dangerous for us, but you are protected as best as I can ensure now. Spinner's End is better protected, though."

"Severus, I appreciate your concern, but let's not worry so. Look, we've reached their street. Which house is it?"

"That one," Severus said, pointing to the third house on the right.

They finished their walk, and within five minutes, Lily's family, absent Petunia, was standing in the entrance way, greeting Severus and Tobias.

"A pleasure to meet you, Tobias," Ross was saying, shaking the other man's hand firmly.

"Thank you, er, Ross, is it?" Tobias asked carefully, unaccustomed to such welcoming treatment.

"That's correct. Come into the parlor with me and have a drink."

"Uh, I... thank you, but I'll have to pass. I've given up drinking entirely."

Severus listened to the exchange between the two older men, hoping the awkwardness would wear off soon. Thankfully, Ross just chuckled good-naturedly, made some comment about Tobias showing better restraint than him, and they disappeared into the other room, Ross's voice saying something about getting Tobias a soda instead.

"Your father seems like a charming man," Violet remarked, walking back toward the kitchen. "I'll have to get to know him better over dinner, but I need to check on the roast, lest it gets dried out."

Severus watched Lily's mum retreat, and he glanced sideways at Lily and heaved a sigh of relief.

"That went over better than I had anticipated," Severus murmured.

"Why's that, Sev?" Lily asked curiously.

"I shouldn't speak too soon," Severus remarked. "The evening is still early."

Lily took his hand. "Come on, Sev. Let's go help Mum. You find something to worry about too easily."

Severus grinned, knowing she was right. In the kitchen, Petunia was there with her mum already, but Lily was quick to intervene. She had been trying to help as much as possible around the house ever since returning. Petunia, a little put out, sat at the kitchen table and stared at Severus.

"Well, you're looking more normal again," Petunia said, a tint of rudeness in her voice.

Raising an eyebrow, Severus asked, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's just as I told Lily. You both have hair again."

Absently toying with a lock of hair hanging slightly over his ear, Severus muttered, "Right." He sighed, then asked, "Are you returning to university in the autumn?" He supposed, after all, that he had

better try to be decent toward Petunia, seeing as she would be his sister-in-law soon.

"I'm planning on it," Petunia said stiffly. "And what about you? Lily doesn't have any definite plans for her future, but I told her, if you two are getting married, she either needs to work or plan on staying at home with the kids. Are you having kids?"

Taken aback, for Severus wasn't used to being exposed to this nosy side of Petunia, he stated, "One day, yes, but not any time soon." Severus thought of the Prophecy and didn't want to be caught in the predicament of *his* child being the Chosen One, but neither did he think it any of Petunia's business to know what their plans were after marriage.

Severus found himself trying to imagine what a child would look like with Lily's and his characteristics mixed. He hoped the poor child would be spared his nose, but at least the child wouldn't have bad eyesight and unruly hair reminiscent of a Potter.

"You never answered my other question," Petunia interrupted his thoughts.

"What? Oh," Severus said, shaking his head clear of thoughts about a child. "I intend to go into Healing, which is like a doctor."

"Don't you need extensive education for that?" Petunia asked.

"Wizards don't have university like Muggles, but there are training programs for the first several years. I would be in a four-year program."

"Hmmm," was all Petunia said.

Lily walked over and joined them, smiling. "Did I miss anything?"

"Nothing of much consequence," Severus quickly said, hoping to quell any further conversation.

Before anyone could say anything more, Violet announced that dinner was ready. Everyone issued into the dining room, and the meal commenced.

"Everything looks very good," Tobias observed. "Thank you for having me."

"Of course," Violet said with a nonchalant wave of the hand.

The plates were passed and filled, and ten minutes into dinner, the nightmare Severus envisioned was happening. Tobias and Ross was busy exchanging raunchy jokes. Petunia looked like she might be ill, but Lily and Violet were giggling nonstop. Severus wanted to bury his face in his hands, but even he couldn't help but smile at a few of the punch lines.

By the end of the evening, it seemed both fathers had finally run out of jokes to share. Lily and Severus went onto the front porch and sat on the swing to get some fresh air.

"Are you happy you brought your dad over now, Sev?" Lily asked.

"Yes, even though he rather made an arse of himself on more than one occasion," Severus said wryly.

Laughing, Lily replied, "It was harmless. My parents like him."

"Truly?"

"Of course." Lily turned and gazed into the window, seeing the adults smiling and animatedly engaged in conversation. "Look at them."

"Hmmm," Severus murmured. "It's just... going to take some getting used to, I guess. If they like me well enough, I suppose they can like him."

"They more than like you, Sev," Lily said kindly. "They love you."

"And sometimes, to be honest, I wonder how your parents can be so nice... and not just nice, but sincere, just like you." Severus's eyes searched Lily's. "There aren't enough people like you in the world."

"Don't sell yourself short, Sev. I'd say you're pretty rare and special, too. I knew you from the first moment I saw you jump out from behind that bush."

"I was a poor kid in mismatched clothes with no friends," Severus muttered, embarrassed by his younger self.

"Appearances are more often than not deceiving, but even so, I never saw anything to hate in you. You just wanted a friend, someone to share your world with."

"As I said, you were always kind, Lily, but hey, let's not dwell on the past. Our future starts tomorrow."

"Graduation," Lily saw in awe. The sunset's dim glow was shining in her eyes as she spoke. "But after that, our wedding, Sev. I am so very glad to have you to share my world with."

They entwined hands and gazed ahead as the last rays of today disappeared.

Author's Note: So... I know I promised you the graduation chapter next, but as I started writing this, it took a direction of its own. You know how the characters sometimes seem to dictate to you what they would rather do? Well, that's what happened. As I started writing, I realized there were some things I needed to develop and some questions to answer.

As for Tobias being the best man, I will admit that this was a close one in the poll. Slightly more than half of you voted for Tobias over Mr. Evans. This was a hard decision for me, but as Severus thought in this chapter, it wouldn't seem right to take away from Mr. Evans giving Lily away by making him best man, too.

Graduation will most definitely be next!

Chapter Seventy-Seven

Severus shifted uncomfortably. The sun was out in full force and was beating down upon every student seated in the stiff, wooden chairs arranged in several rows on the grassy lawn of Hogwarts. Dressed in their finest school robes and, unfortunately to the students, donning pointed black hats, the graduating class was gathered, seated alphabetically, and chattering amongst themselves.

Severus could see the back of Lily's head a few rows ahead, and he frowned, wishing their last names were closer together.

In a few short weeks, she will be Lily Snape, and if that were the case now, she would be sitting right next to me, Severus thought fondly, encouraged.

He caught his father's eye for a moment, and then Lily's parents, who were seated with Tobias, cast him smiles. Petunia appeared distinctively unsure of herself, but Severus gleaned a wonder in her eyes as they roamed in awe over the grounds and on to the impressive castle beyond.

Dumbledore stepped onto the platform and pointed his wand at himself, magnifying his voice, saying, "Good morning, everyone. It is my pleasure to present to you the class of 1978 of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Let the ceremony begin!"

There was a round of applause, and Severus tried not to grimace when Professor Flitwick began conducting some enchanted instruments to play the Hogwarts Alma Mater. Severus didn't suppose there was any official tune to the ridiculous song, since the instruments had just as much variation in the tune each chose to play as when the students sang the song to their choice of tune. When his eyes drifted to Petunia, Severus tried not to snigger, as she appeared unsettled and affronted at the cacophony coming from the blaring horns and squeaky strings.

Just when Severus thought he was going to have to cast a spell to spare him further damage to his precious eardrums, the noise stopped. There was a hesitant applause from the student body and

the families. Only Dumbledore seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself.

Dumbledore stood behind the podium and resumed making some opening remarks, most of which Severus ignored. He had been through this once before as a student and several times as a professor. The other professors appeared happy for the graduates, but Severus knew he had simply sat there when he had been a professor, an eternal scowl plastered to his face, awaiting the end of the ceremony.

Finally, Dumbledore announced that the diplomas were to be issued. The Heads of House were invited to stand in a line to receive each student as he or she stood and walked to the front. Dumbledore began announcing the names alphabetically, including what house that person belonged to and any special honors he or she might have.

When Sirius's name was spoken, Sirius proudly stood and ambled to the front. Professor McGonagall was smiling widely at him and shook his hand vigorously, and from his seat, Severus had to retrain himself from snorting.

Not too long after that, Lily was called.

"Lily Evans, of Gryffindor, Head Girl, and excelling in Charms and Potions," Dumbledore's voice grandly proclaimed.

Severus watched proudly as Lily made her way to the front. Her family was cheering, and even Petunia was politely clapping. Several students were calling out her name, whistling, and clapping, but Severus just smiled at her. Never one to make a spectacle of himself, Severus wondered if any of the other students could truly be as happy for her as he was. Somehow, he doubted it.

Lily was graciously received by all the Heads of House and the headmaster. McGonagall showed an uncharacteristic amount of emotion by bestowing a hug upon Lily, and Slughorn exuberantly shook her hand. Severus wondered how she didn't fall off the stage. Once Lily turned to come back to her seat, her eyes found Severus, and she smiled boldly at him, waving.

The ceremony proceeded, Remus Lupin going up modestly, but when it came James Potter's time, he was even more pompous than Sirius. Severus shifted again in his seat, anxiously awaiting the end of the proceeding.

Finally, Dumbledore announced, "Severus Snape, of Slytherin, Head boy, and excelling in Potions and Defense."

Taking a deep breath, Severus stood and walked toward the stage. He could hear Lily's parents and his father clapping, and when he passed the row where Lily was seated, he couldn't help but turn his head. She beamed at him, clapping boisterously. Severus offered her a small smile and quickly approached the front, received well by Slughorn and politely by the other professors. Dumbledore gave him his diploma with one hand and stook his hand with the other, remarking, "Well done, Severus. You ought to be proud."

Severus gave the headmaster the briefest of nods, wishing to be done and away from the center of attention. Although the applause wasn't as loud as it had been for Lily, Severus was pleasantly surprised when quite a few of the students applauded. He returned to his seat promptly, and after him, there weren't too many students left.

After the seemingly unending rollcall was through, Dumbledore took center stage again, saying, "You are now all officially graduated from Hogwarts. In the midst of times such as these, you have much ahead of you, but I have no doubts that you all will go far and make the wizarding world proud. This is the first time in years that I have witnessed such unity among the houses. It is only together that we will stand strong and prevail over the darkness that threatens to take everything we hold dear from us, but you young men and women are going to make a world of difference. You have chosen to embrace the virtues of all four houses: hard work, ambition, courage, and wisdom. On behalf of the staff, we wish you all success and luck in all your future endeavors! With that said, congratulations!"

Flitwick began conducting the array of instruments once again, only they played in unison, the music much more pleasant. With the pomp of the music, the students threw their hats up into the air. Families

stood and applauded more loudly than ever before. In the crowd, Severus stood and sought Lily, eager to congratulate her.

Finding Lily, Severus wasted no time in throwing his arms around her.

"This is it! It's official, Sev! We're really finished!" Lily exclaimed excitedly.

"So it would seem," Severus said wryly, smirking.

Lily laughed at his sarcasm. "Come on, Sev," Lily beckoned. "Let's go to our families."

Nodding, Severus allowed Lily to take him by the hand and lead him through the crowd. When they reached Violet, Ross, Petunia, and Tobias, Lily immediately asked, "So, what did you think?"

"I'm happy to be a part of this celebration," Violet remarked. "From what you'd told me about Hogwarts, I could only imagine what it must look like, but this is truly amazing."

"I must say, the opening song was certainly quite the treat," Ross joked, to which Tobias laughed, but Violet playfully smacked her husband on the arm.

Lily briefly giggled, but sobered when her eyes came to rest on Petunia, who was gaping longingly at the castle, and she was reminded of the time long ago when Petunia had written to Dumbledore, asking to attend Hogwarts.

While Severus spoke with his father to the side, Lily approached her quiet sister and asked softly, "Tuney?"

Lily hadn't meant to use her sister's old nickname, but the name had rolled off her tongue naturally. Petunia's eyes left the castle and locked with Lily's. She didn't seem to mind the old name, but a wistful expression filled her face.

"Yes?" Petunia replied just as softly.

"Would you like to personally meet Dumbledore?"

"And why would I want to do that?" Petunia suddenly asked defensively, her walls going back up.

"I didn't mean anything offensive by it," Lily quickly explained. "It's just... you wrote to him when you were a girl. He was kind enough to reply, and I thought you would like the chance to get to meet him after all this time."

Petunia gazed distrustfully at the headmaster off in the distance, who Lily noticed was speaking with the Marauders and their families, save the Blacks.

"Why would he want to talk to me?" Petunia spat.

"Dumbledore would be honored to talk with you," Lily said sincerely. "Come on, Petunia. Please come with me?"

Petunia glanced back at her parents, who were now speaking animatedly with Tobias and Severus.

"Well... all right," she said hesitantly.

Had they been little girls, Lily would have grabbed her sister's hand and pulled her along, but she didn't think Petunia would appreciate being yanked around like a rag doll. Lily stepped toward the headmaster, occasionally glancing to her side to ensure Petunia was still there. The walk was awkward, and as they drew closer, James, Sirius, and Remus were still with Dumbledore. When Lily and Petunia reached the headmaster, Dumbledore's eyes seemed to find Petunia, and he smiled.

Petunia was dumbstruck.

"Ah, this must be your lovely older sister. Petunia, is it?" Dumbledore asked kindly.

Lily was amazed that Dumbledore had remembered after all this time. When she realized Petunia wasn't going to speak, Lily stated, "Yes, sir, that's right. Petunia, meet Professor Dumbledore."

Petunia, not wishing to be rude in front of such a formidable figure, extended her hand slowly. Dumbledore took it genially and shook it, saying, "A pleasure to finally meet you. You were a most engaging girl in your letter, and I had wondered what you were like in person."

"I, uh... pleasure to meet you, sir," Petunia said shyly.

Lily exchanged a look with James, who was smirking. He stepped forward and extended his hand to Petunia.

"Petunia, is it?" James said earnestly. "I'm James Potter, a friend of your sister's. And these two not as handsome blokes are Sirius and Remus, my best mates."

Sirius snorted. "Not as handsome as you, James? I beg to differ. Hello there, Petunia." Sirius, always being a flirt with the ladies, bowed at Petunia, no doubt trying to be dashing.

Remus was modest and waved, uttering a quiet, "Hello."

Petunia was at a loss for words. Lily hoped her sister wasn't affronted by being surrounded by so many wizards, but then, Petunia's lips hitched into a smile at Sirius's antics. If Lily wasn't mistaken, Petunia almost seemed... flattered.

While Petunia interacted with the Marauders, Dumbledore placed a hand on Lily's forearm, saying, "My congratulations, Lily."

"Thank you, sir," Lily replied politely.

"I was wondering if you might get Severus?" Dumbledore suddenly inquired. "There is something I would like to share with you both."

Lily gave him a quizzical look, to which Dumbledore merely chuckled. "I assure you; it's nothing bad."

"All right," Lily said. "I'll be right back."

Curious as to what the headmaster could have up his loose sleeve, Lily made to return to her family, Tobias, and Severus. She glanced behind her, seeing Petunia wrapped up with Sirius. Thinking the

scene quite strange indeed, Lily shrugged, then continued to walk toward Severus.

"Sorry to interrupt," Lily apologized to the group, "but Dumbledore wished to speak with you, Severus."

Severus's eyebrows knitted together. "Do you know why?"

"I don't know," Lily admitted, "but he wished to speak with us both, not just you alone."

"All right," Severus said, having an idea what this might be about. "Excuse me," he murmured to his father and Lily's parents.

"We'll just be here waiting," Violet stated. "Don't worry about us."

"Hopefully it won't take too long," Lily assured. "Oh, and before you wonder about Petunia, she's off speaking with some of my, er, friends."

At this, Severus gazed incredulously at Lily. He wished to ask what friends Lily meant, but his eyes, while scanning the crowd for Dumbledore, found Petunia with the Marauders.

Well, there's a sight I never thought I'd see, Severus thought, shocked.

Without further delay, Severus and Lily returned to Dumbledore.

"Congratulations, Severus," Dumbledore said in way of greeting.

"Thank you, sir," Severus replied, a little guarded. He knew Dumbledore hadn't asked him over to simply congratulate him.

Dumbledore inconspicuously flicked his wand, likely casting a spell to deter others, and lowered his voice, then said, "I was wondering... I've already asked James, Sirius, and Remus to join, and they readily agreed. Seeing as you are now finished at Hogwarts, I would like to extend to you an invitation to a sort of secret society called the Order of the Phoenix. I lead this organization, and what it is is a group of

people who have agreed to fight against Voldemort and his followers."

Lily's eyes were huge at this revelation, and Severus tried to appear equally surprised and not flinch at the use of Voldemort's name.

"Wow," Lily breathed. "I always knew you stood for the side of Light, sir, but I had no idea..."

Dumbledore smiled. "Most don't, Lily. I am not asking you to decide this moment, but there will be a meeting soon, but I cannot reveal its time or location until I have your consent."

"I'll join," Lily said eagerly. She looked expectantly at Severus, thinking he would be leaping at this opportunity.

Severus's suspicions were confirmed. While he would join, he held some reservation, thinking of his involvement in the Order last time.

Yes, but this won't be like that, Severus mentally told himself. You won't be a spy. People may actually trust you, even like you.

Before either Dumbledore or Lily could think Severus was having doubts, Severus stated firmly, "Yes, I will join, too."

"Excellent!" Dumbledore replied, his voice full of energy. "The next meeting will be in two weeks from tonight, at seven o'clock at the Hog's Head's basement."

Dumbledore lifted the charm around them, saying, "I must go congratulate a few others." Giving them a wink, he ambled off.

"Can you imagine, Sev?" Lily asked.

He was tempted to say he could, but refrained. "It will be quite the experience, I'm sure."

Chapter Seventy-Eight

A couple of days following graduation, Lily was sitting on the porch swing in the front of her house. The day was still new, so Lily was taking the time to enjoy the peace and solitude. She closed her eyes and allowed the feeling to go deeper, to descend into the lowest depths and fill her. When the front door clicked, Lily was startled out of her reverie, and she opened her eyes, seeing Petunia stepping outside.

"Oh," Petunia said, "I didn't realize you were out here, Lily."

"It's okay," Lily replied, smiling. Patting the seat next to her, Lily said, "Take a seat."

Petunia complied. "I didn't expect anyone else to be up and about this early."

"Neither did I," Lily confessed. "What happened to sleeping in?"

Petunia had a habit of sleeping later than the rest of her family during the summer, but as Petunia made to speak, Lily had a feeling that had changed.

"Ever since I came home to help Mum, I haven't been sleeping in," Petunia explained, suddenly refusing to meet Lily's eyes.

"Oh, right," Lily said in a subdued voice. Brightening, she added, "But Mum's better now. She's been in remission for a while now. You'll be returning to university in the autumn."

"Yes," Petunia acknowledged. "Things will be back to normal, although not quite. You'll be married by September."

"But I'll be close," Lily said softly. "Petunia, are you... are you all right with this?"

"With what?" Petunia asked, but Lily knew her sister was avoiding the question.

"With me marrying Severus," Lily stated gently. Before, she would have been less careful with her wording and tone, but Lily didn't want to break the fragile thread that held Petunia and her together. That thread, after all, had been on the mend for the past few months.

Petunia sighed, then met Lily's gaze. "At first, you know how I felt about him, about your being with him, but- but he's not so bad," Petunia confessed. "I still don't think he likes me very much."

Releasing a breath of relief, Lily replied, "Severus doesn't hate you, Petunia, but, in fact, he thinks you dislike him. You two have never gotten on well, but I recall you both having a civil conversation last week. That's a start."

Petunia shrugged. "It's just... hard. He never seemed to accept me," she whispered.

A part of Lily wanted to protest and point out that Petunia had never accepted Severus, either; from the start, Petunia had wrinkled her nose and spoken with contempt toward the poor boy from the rundown part of the neighborhood. This time, however, Lily held her tongue.

"That will come with time," Lily said.

"You know, the funny thing is," Petunia started to say, then a blush crept onto her cheeks, "I thought all wizards were like Severus, but when I met those other boys at your graduation, I was surprised to find that some of them are handsome, charming, and kind."

Lily's lips pressed together in annoyance. "You're saying that Sirius is everything Severus is not, is that correct?" she posed pointedly.

Petunia's blush increased. "Well, to me... yes. Lily, I know you're in love with him, so he must give you what you're looking for, but as I told you, he was never nice to me. He's always sneering and sarcastic, which is hardly charming, and come on, handsome? Love must be blind. With a nose like that... and although he's much improved now, his hair used to be constantly greasy and his clothes dirty and torn-"

Holding up her hand to silence her sister, Lily stated, "You don't need to go on insulting him, Petunia. You forget that yes, I *do* love him very much. Maybe Severus isn't classically handsome like Sirius Black, but I find him attractive in a distinguished way, and there are more important things about people besides what they look like. He is kind and charming, just not toward you. I suppose you think that Vernon fellow was handsome, charming, and kind, do you?" Snorting, Lily continued, "He was anything but, and as for Sirius, until recently, I couldn't stand him. Handsome though he may be, his charm is overdone with all the girls in the school, and he isn't that kind. He used to pick on Severus incessantly."

Petunia was about to stand, but Lily, realizing their conversation had escalated into another argument, reached for Petunia's hand. "Petunia, wait... Don't go, please. I'm sorry... Look, can we please not fight?"

Petunia sat down in a huff and slowly uncrossed her arms. "Fine," she said shortly. "But don't go trying to tell me what to feel about someone. Perhaps you don't like Sirius, but-"

"You *like* him?" Lily asked incredulously.

"Well, yes," Petunia said softly, her cheeks going red again. "You said you used to not be able to stand him until recently, but do you get on well now?"

"Sirius is fine," Lily admitted.

"Will he be at your wedding?" Petunia implored, a bit too forward.

"I, uh... I guess so," Lily replied, shocked at her sister's sudden interest. "Why? Are you wanting to see him again?"

Although Petunia's stony expression said otherwise, her voice betrayed her. "Maybe."

Lily smiled. *Who would have thought? Petunia fancies a wizard.*

"Why are you smiling?" Petunia asked, annoyed and bothered.

"No reason," Lily said innocently. "No reason at all."

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The summer evening crowd in Hogsmeade was light and quiet. A couple of children ran through the street, laughing as they chased each other, much to their mother's protestations from behind as she tried to keep up. A young couple in love sat outside Madam Puddifoot's, their hands clasped on the table and staring adoringly into each other's eyes. Businesses were winding down for the day, some of them already closed, and the sun was lowering in the sky, casting long shadows.

Severus and Lily strolled through the main street, their destination the only thing in mind. While Severus wasn't as anxious to be a part of the Order, this was Lily's first time at a meeting. Severus kept glancing at her face.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I wonder what to expect. I mean, wow, Sev!" Lily couldn't help herself in her excitement. "What do you think they'll discuss?"

"We'll probably have to go through some sort of induction first," Severus explained, "but it'll mostly be talk of the war... what they've found out, who is doing what undercover work..."

He spoke nonchalantly, as if he were just trying to guess, but beside him, Lily's eyes kept growing larger.

"How d'you know all that?" she asked, astonished.

"Just my instinctive, educated guesses," Severus replied with a shrug, careful to keep his composure calm.

Indeed, Severus was wondering what the dynamic would be like. Having not been to an Order meeting until the second war, he hadn't personally known those who had been killed the first time, with the exception of Lily and James. At that thought, his blood ran cold, and he visibly shivered, even though the evening was quite warm.

"Sev?" came the soft, concerned voice.

"I was just thinking about the war," Severus explained. "A lot of people could wind up dead."

Frowning, Lily nodded. She didn't often ponder the grim reality of this war, but why would she? Unlike the man beside her, she had no experience directly.

Finally, the crooked sign of the Hog's Head came into view. They approached the shady pub and walked around to the back.

"There's a door somewhere here," Severus murmured. Finding it, he opened it for Lily and entered after her.

A long staircase led them down into a dark, dank basement. The lighting was poor, so they had to watch their steps, as to avoid falling. Upon reaching the bottom, a small room with a single, long wooden table surrounded by about twenty chairs greeted them. Already seated around the table were many people, several faces Severus didn't recognize. This was the original Order of the Phoenix, after all, and even when he had been spying for Dumbledore during the first war, he had never attended a meeting.

Severus took a hesitant step into the room, swallowing down the bile that was threatening to rise in his throat. He didn't know many of these individuals because they had been killed the first time around, and although he hadn't felt anxious moments ago, that wasn't proving the case any longer.

He instantly recognized Dumbledore and his brother, Aberforth, who was sitting sternly and quietly beside his more outgoing counterpart. Mad-Eye Moody was there, although seeing him without the chunk missing from his nose and missing his rotating eye was strange. He looked remarkably younger and in his prime as an Auror. Elphias Doge, Dumbledore's old friend, Severus knew from before, and he didn't look too different, although an incredibly stupid-looking hat rested upon his head, his flyaway, silvery hair sticking out on the sides.

Dumbledore stood and was enthusiastically shaking Lily's hand, as she had slowly and curiously made her way toward the table, and he was beckoning her toward the others when Severus heard James Potter's voice behind him.

"Fancy seeing you here, Snape," James said smugly.

Turning around, Severus slightly sneered at the other boy. "I suppose I could say the same about you," he drawled. Seeing Sirius and Remus just beyond James, Severus said stiffly, "Black, Lupin."

"Hello, Severus," Remus replied politely.

"I'd be willing to bet you're the only Slytherin here," Sirius murmured, smirking.

Severus was about to reply with an especially biting retort, but Dumbledore was now standing amongst them.

"Good evening, boys... or should I say young men?" Dumbledore asked, winking. "Regardless, welcome. Please find a seat, and now that everyone is here, it's time we got started."

Severus exchanged a look with the Marauders and took a seat next to Lily. Seated on his other side was a young couple who he realized he recognized. The Longbottoms.

Remembering seeing their tragic story in the newspaper, Severus would never forget those faces. They had stared back with blank expressions in the photographs in the *Daily Prophet* at the time, so seeing them now gazing back at him with interested and very lively eyes was unnerving. The man held out his hand in earnest toward Severus.

"Frank Longbottom," the man stated boldly. "I'm in my first year as an official Auror, and this is my newly-wed wife and love of my life, Alice."

Beside Frank, a pretty, brown-haired girl with a round face smiled kindly at Severus.

Severus gulped, clearly seeing Neville Longbottom's features shared between his parents. He managed a shaky reply.

"S-Severus Snape," he said.

"Well, it's good to have you here, Severus," Frank replied, far too forward for Severus's tastes.

Frank was the opposite of his timid son in so many ways, although, then again, Neville *had* courageously put up quite a resistance against Severus and the Carrows during his seventh year at Hogwarts. Still, a part of Severus wanted to insist on Frank addressing him by his last name until they were better acquainted, but to Frank, Severus was just a teenager, barely out of school.

Dumbledore stood, raising his hands to quiet those gathered, and the talk around the table slowly grew quieter, until completely silent. Dumbledore smiled, saying, "Welcome, everyone. As you can see, we have some new members tonight. These fine, young people are fresh out of Hogwarts, and in their seventh year there, they stood for the principles we uphold. They have graciously agreed to be a part of the Order of the Phoenix, so let me introduce to you James Potter, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Lily Evans, and Severus Snape." As Dumbledore spoke each name, he paused for a couple of seconds afterward, motioning toward each individual and letting them acknowledge their introduction.

There was a polite applause and series of welcomes from around the table, then Dumbledore continued, "Before we get any further into our meeting, it is necessary to officially induct you, our newest members. You will be bound to keeping silence about this organization's secrets and information, and since I am the Secret Keeper for the Order, you only know of our meeting place because I have told you. No one else but me can reveal this location to an outsider. Is everything clear?"

Severus and the others nodded.

"Very well. Now, please raise your right hands and answer with 'I will' to the following questions."

The hands were raised, and Dumbledore asked, "Will you, to the best of your ability, fight for the side of Light, defending what is right and just, in both the Wizarding and Muggle worlds?"

"I will," the five voices echoed, and a white ropelike bit of magic left Dumbledore's wand and wrapped around their hands, encircling their wrists.

"Will you, to the best of your ability, be always honest with your fellow members of the Order of the Phoenix and never lie or betray them?"

"I will." Again, the magic roped around their hands.

"And finally, will you, to the best of your ability, be willing to give your life for the greater good if it should come to that?"

"I will." The last chord wrapped around, joining the others, and then they disappeared, breaking away.

Severus inwardly shuddered, reminded too much of the Unbreakable Vow, but he had gone through this process once before. It was so unlike the induction into Voldemort's ranks, which involved pain and a demand to do something to prove yourself and why you ought to be allowed into the Death Eaters.

"Now that that is done," Dumbledore continued, "let us begin the meeting. Edgar, would you like to start?"

Severus's eyes drifted to a man seated on the opposite side of the table, who was probably in his mid-thirties. His brown hair was tidy, and he wore a small mustache.

"Certainly, Albus," Edgar replied. "I'm Edgar Bones, by the way," he said to the new members. "It's a pleasure to have you here. Now, getting down to business, as Frank might be able to tell you, we have been tailing two men who are alleged Death Eaters, Dolohov and Travers."

Upon hearing those names spoken, Severus wanted to jump out of his seat and confirm the truth: that those two men were indeed Death

Eaters. Instead, he kept silent. Everyone would think him mad or demand to know how he had such information.

"We last spotted them in Knockturn Alley a week ago," Frank added. "Edgar wanted to send a group of Aurors after them, but by the time they arrived, the two suspects had gotten out of our sight."

Severus listened keenly. It was apparent that Edgar Bones was an Auror, obviously one more experienced than Frank.

"Thank you both," Dumbledore said kindly. "That is good information, and I trust they didn't realize you have been following them?"

"No, I don't believe so," Edgar replied.

Nodding, Dumbledore asked him if he had anything more to share, and when Edgar responded in the negative, Dumbledore asked a tall, regal-looking man named Caradoc Dearborn to speak on any suspicious activity within the Ministry. The man was an Unspeakable, which intrigued Lily greatly, and Severus glanced at her from time to time, observing how large her eyes were with wonder.

Aberforth spoke at great length of the activity and conversations he had managed to hear bits of whilst shady individuals were in his pub. By the end of the hour, Dumbledore was ready to close the meeting.

"It would seem that we need to continue along with what we're already doing, then. Voldemort doesn't seem to be making any bold moves right now, which is unsettling. The fact that he is gaining followers left, right, and center is by itself alarming and calls for caution."

"Constant vigilance, I say!" Moody barked, his mouth in a crooked smile. He looked hungry to catch the next Death Eaters they found. "Put me on that case, Albus, and I'll find 'em for you better than these newbies." He motioned toward Frank and Edgar, who frowned.

"Alastor," Dumbledore stated, "you know you need to work with the Ministry to get yourself assigned to certain cases. Have you been on Rufus Scrimgeour's bad side too recently?"

"Bloke keeps givin' all the good cases to Crouch," Moody practically pouted. "Crouch is more ruthless than I am, or so Scrimgeour says."

Dumbledore nodded. "Barty Crouch is willing to go too far, I daresay. I wouldn't trust a man like that in the Order."

Silenced, Moody gruffly nodded.

Dumbledore ended the meeting, which left Severus with an troubling feeling in the pit of his stomach. He knew that Crouch was a bit off before his son had been captured. He wondered further what had happened to Edgar Bones and Caradoc Dearborn, among others.

He stood, the names going through his mind of all those who had died the first time, those who he had just met...

Benjy Fenwick, Marlene McKinnon, Dorcas Meadows, Gideon and Fabian Prewett...

Seeing those faces so alive and expressive was unnerving.

Lily joined him a moment later. "Severus?" she softly inquired after him.

Forcing himself back to the present moment, Severus blinked, pushing a strand of hair out of his eye.

"Sorry," he murmured. "It was just..."

"A long meeting?" Sirius asked loudly, laughing.

Severus scowled and turned to see the three Gryffindor boys standing there.

"Aw, don't look so serious, Snape," James stated in earnest. "This was pretty cool."

Yes, thinking about people dying is 'cool,' Potter. "It's late," Severus said. "Are you ready to go, Lily?"

Lily nodded, wishing to stay and talk with the others, but knowing Severus wished to leave, she gave in and took his hand.

"We'll come along," James started to say, but when Lily glared at him, he backed off. "Or not."

Once outside, Lily's hand clasped Severus's clammy one harder. "Sev?" she implored. "Are you sure you're all right? You're looking paler than usual."

Severus stopped in midstride and faced her. "I'm sorry, Lily. It's just... now that we're done with school, everything is all the more real. I have a bad feeling that some of those people in that room won't survive this war."

Lily brought a hand to his cheek and ran it through his soft hair. "You can't do this to yourself, Sev. You'll drive yourself mental thinking like that. Now, come. As you said, it's late."

Sighing, Severus nodded, giving her a half-hearted smile, and they Disapparated.

Author's Note: Although the induction ritual into the Order isn't canon, I imagine there would have to be some sort of induction. That was my attempt. All members mentioned were indeed original Order members who wound up dead.

By the way, someone published an Italian translation of this story on an Italian Harry Potter fanfiction website. The webmistress of the site alerted me to this. I never authorized this translation, and apparently, this individual didn't give me credit at first. Then, some readers recognized the story as my own and complained to the webmistress. Believe it or not, this person then claimed I had given her permission and had also agreed to let her change the plot after she was called out for it by the webmistress! When the webmistress contacted me, I made it very clear that I would never, ever authorize someone changing my story. Since then, the story has been removed and this person was blocked. You can see the page here (with a link to my story now): [www . efpfanfic . net / viewstory . php?sid219592&i1](http://www.efpfanfic.net/viewstory.php?sid219592&i1) (remove spaces).

So, a big thank you to my loyal fans who saw this for what it was! If you see this story published in another language somewhere (other than French or Russian, as I gave permission to people for those

translations) and my name isn't mentioned, please notify me or the person in charge of that site!

Chapter Seventy-Nine

In the weeks following the Order meeting, Severus had much on his weary mind. He began his program at St. Mungo's two weeks after the meeting, which was going to prove to be four years of intensive training. Eight hours every weekday, Severus was at the hospital working with various Healers, although he was given a couple of hours every day to devote to an area of research he deemed necessary, due to his interest and extensive knowledge in Potions.

While he could busy himself with work, when he wasn't with Lily, his mind drifted to thoughts about all those he'd seen that day in the meeting. So many had died, and he wracked his brain, trying to remember circumstances. Many of the victims of the Death Eaters had been blank faces, all looking like the other, but as Severus thought of any battle involving Aurors, he realized he remembered Edgar Bones. It hadn't been so much of a battle as it had been a slaughter. He had purposefully put the man's name out of his mind...

Severus was only a Death Eater for six months. The Christmas holiday was nearly upon the world, and despite the threat of Voldemort, people were still celebrating. This would be the first time he would be going on a "mission" with some of the older Death Eaters, and according to Mulciber, there was no greater honor. Of the new recruits that past summer after their final year at Hogwarts, Severus and Mulciber had been picked to embark on what was to be a progressive and bold step for what Voldemort stood for.

The Bones family, although at one time a pureblood family, had gone soft and started intermingling with Muggles and Mudbloods alike. Severus hadn't known the details at the time of what they were being called to do, so like an inexperienced fool, he followed orders and went with the group of five, including himself, to an undisclosed location somewhere in the countryside.

It was the middle of the night, and Travers and Dolohov, both of whom had complained about what a "pain in the arse" Edgar Bones had become, led Lucius Malfoy, Mulciber, and Severus to a small cottage.

They hid behind some bushes, staking out the scene.

"I can just smell the excitement, can't you, my young friend?" Lucius whispered to Severus.

Although inwardly nervous, Severus nodded, keeping his outward composure calm and collected. If he had learned anything from being in Slytherin, it was how to survive. To be a weakling would set him up to be the victim, and now that Severus no longer had to live under the constant torment of the Marauders and his bloody father, he was going to show the world who he truly was, the strong and powerful wizard he was destined to be.

"Shut it back there," Travers hissed. "Let's move."

Not knowing what to expect, Severus felt his feet carrying him across the dormant grass and toward the house. Travers waved his wand, testing the protection on the house, and laughed humorlessly.

"A bit too sure of himself, the fool. He's made this all too easy," Travers whispered.

The two older wizards quickly and effectively removed the magical wards on the house and kicked in the door. The sound reverberated through the house, and Severus thought Travers an idiot to alert their victims, but laughing malevolently, Travers smiled.

"They won't be going anywhere," Dolohov stated. "The Dark Lord instructed us very carefully. They're trapped and at our mercy. Now spread out and don't spare anyone."

Severus took this as their cue. He figured Travers and Dolohov must have not only removed the wards protecting the house, but they must have replaced them with wards preventing the family from leaving. Severus stood there for a moment, confused, but Lucius yanked him by the arm toward a room on the left.

Severus could already hear the shouts and cries from the family members. In the room next to them, a duel was ensuing. He heard a body fall to the floor, most likely in death.

"Come on, Severus!" Lucius commanded.

Severus watched as his friend raised his wand at a ten-year-old boy who had just woken. The boy's cry for help never left him as a green jet of light from Lucius's wand hit him squarely in the chest. Thankfully, no one else was in that room.

Lucius glared at Severus standing there, dumbstruck. The blonde-haired wizard made to run out of the room, but stopped at the door, barking, "Severus!"

Shaken out of his daze, Severus's eyes snapped away from the lifeless form of the child on his bed, imagining he could have simply been sleeping. Severus retreated into the hallway, and they followed the noises coming from farther down the hall.

Travers and Edgar Bones were in a full-on duel in the hall there. Edgar's face was fierce and lined with tears. Severus easily could imagine why.

While the Auror was a skilled wizard in his own right, he was now sorely outnumbered, and the Death Eaters were closing in on him.

"Well, don't just stand there!" Lucius bellowed at Severus, finally having had enough of his friend's lack of motivation. "Hit him!"

Although Severus was sure this meant employing the Killing Curse, he couldn't bring himself to utter the words. He had never actually killed anyone before. It seemed easy in theory, but when the moment demanded the speaking of two words that would end a life, that was a lot scarier. Hesitating, Severus instead yelled, "Sectumsempra!"

Mulciber laughed cruelly. "Good one, Severus!"

As Mulciber's hand roughly clapped him on the back, Severus's curse slashed Edgar across the chest, knocking him to the floor. The blood was liberally pouring out of him. Edgar gazed up, taken off-guard. His accusatory, desperate eyes turned on Severus as Travers finished him off with a well-aimed Avada Kedavra to the chest.

Severus took a step back, alarmed. Lucius was smiling, exclaiming his congratulations toward Severus for his part in bringing down the Auror.

The older Death Eaters weren't so amused, though.

"Idiot!" Dolohov yelled at Severus. "You should've finished him!"

"Enough!" Travers interjected roughly. "We need to go... NOW!"

With that, the five of them Disapparated, leaving blood and death in their wake.

Horried at his recollection of that event, Severus dropped to the couch in the sitting room of Spinner's End. His fingers clenched at the sides of his skull in anguish as he pulled at his hair. Squeezing his eyes shut, he fought the guilty tears that threatened to spill over.

Who do I think I am? What the bloody hell am I doing? Who am I kidding?!

Crying out, Severus suddenly stood, dropping his wand to the floor. He began to pace. How was he expecting himself to be able to be all good and noble and be a part of the Order? His other life's choices weighed too heavily, and for a moment, he stopped in his pacing and stared at the mantel of the fireplace, where a framed picture of Lily sat. Going to it, he held it deftly in his hands, his fingers gently caressing the decorative pattern of the frame.

"Lily," he whispered, "I swear it... If it weren't for you, would I have any good in me?"

Severus dropped to the couch once again. For the first time in months, he was doubting his true nature. The rational part of him knew he ought to know better by now, but one couldn't simply erase an existence of terror. Dumbledore had been right. Those old memories would haunt him... were haunting him.

You have to get a hold of yourself, Severus forced himself to think. You haven't wasted the two years of this new life you've been given so far. You'll just have to work all the harder to make up for your past.

Setting his jaw in determination, Severus willed himself to calm down and focus. He had had years of experience in doing just that. He couldn't allow his emotions to demand control now. He made a

promise to himself that day to try to save as many people as possible, whether in the war effort or in his career.

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While Severus busied himself at St. Mungo's, Lily was still deliberating on what career path to take. She knew she could do anything she liked, and while she technically had until the autumn to decide what program to enter, she felt she should be doing something already, like Severus.

They had both been overachievers in school, so for Lily to be at home when she knew Severus was working and learning was frustrating. While she knew nothing of the deep affliction Severus was experiencing in that very moment, she would rather have been with him than standing in front of a mirror in the bridal shop.

Her mind was anywhere except on trying to decide if this dress was the right one. Never the type of girl to overly concern herself with what she wore, Lily could have cared less about her wedding dress. Sure, she was excited about the wedding and looking forward to starting a life together with Severus, but she couldn't wrap her mind around the formality of the whole mess.

"Tell me again," Lily stated, wincing as the lady working at the shop grabbed hold of the dress and muttered something about "taking it in," "*why* are we spending an entire day putting me through this agony?"

"Lily," Petunia admonished, "some brides spend several *days* pouring over which dress they want to wear, but since you have little over a month until your wedding, you need to make a decision. Really, you should've taken care of this months ago."

Lily sighed, wondering if it was real or imagined that Petunia was clicking her tongue in disapproval.

Just then, Violet returned with five more dresses.

"These are just ravishing, Lily, dear," her mum was saying.

"Ugh, Mum!" Lily exclaimed, throwing her hands up. The lady who was taking her measurements stepped away in alarm, clearly knowing when she was not wanted.

"Is something wrong?" Violet asked kindly.

"It's hot and stuffy in here," Lily said, exasperated. Then, against her conscious decision, Lily's eyes dropped onto her reflection. She stared for a minute at herself.

The dress was... not overstated, but not plain. It had thin straps to hold it in place on the shoulders, and pearls lined the straps and the top of the bodice, which was covered with smaller pearly-type floral patterns. The skirt was A-line and trimmed with the same design along the bottom, and the train was only three feet long. Although she wore no veil yet, Lily could imagine the gentle flow of the lacey whiteness trailing down her back like long, beautiful hair. As for her own hair, it had grown out enough to frame her face in soft, short curls.

Closing her eyes, Lily pictured Severus seeing her walk down the aisle in this dress. She stared ahead, seeing him in a tuxedo and looking absolutely dashing, having eyes only for her, the woman he loved the most in the world.

She opened her eyes again and allowed a sweet smile to relax her face.

"This is the one," Lily said.

"Are you sure?" Petunia asked, sounding doubtful. "It's not as detailed as the one you tried on two dresses ago..."

"I think it's elegant," Violet stated boldly. "You look lovely, darling."

"Thank you, Mum." Lily wished, for once, that Petunia would hold her tongue. Half of her was tempted to snap, "This isn't your wedding, Petunia," but she didn't say anything.

"Fine," Petunia said disdainfully. "If you don't want my opinion-"

"Petunia," Lily sighed, "of course I value your opinion. Do you like this dress well enough?"

"It's pretty enough, but not beautiful," Petunia said offhandedly.

"And do you like *your* dress?" Lily inquired pointedly, remembering how Petunia had insisted on being able to pick the color and style of her bridesmaid's dress.

"Of course I do," Petunia said indignantly.

"It's settled, then," Violet said calmly. "One day soon, Petunia, when you have your wedding, you'll be able to pick your perfect dress."

Petunia didn't say anything, but from the look on her sister's face, Lily wondered if Petunia was doubting her mum's words.

They paid for the dresses, leaving them at the shop to be tailored and picked up a week later. Once they were back home, Lily sought out Petunia in her bedroom.

"Sirius will be there," Lily stated, leaning against the door.

"So?" Petunia scoffed.

"So?" Lily echoed. "I seem to remember you being tickled pink by him a couple of weeks ago. In your dress, you'll knock the socks off him, Toney."

Petunia blushed. "Do you really think so?" she asked softly.

"I do," Lily said truthfully. "Petunia, if you'd only smile more, you'd see that you're a pretty girl."

"I'm not beautiful like you, Lily," Petunia mumbled. "I never will be."

"Beauty is subjective," Lily reasoned. "You don't like my hair when it's short," she tried to joke.

"It's not so bad now," Petunia replied.

Lily laughed.

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Later that day, Lily and Severus were taking a walk through the park. Lily had recounted her day in the bridal shop, but Severus, although he smiled occasionally, seemed subdued. They stumbled upon "their spot." Finding comfortable seats in the grass, they surveyed each other.

"This place never changes," Lily remarked.

"Mmm," Severus murmured. "But we certainly have."

"Not so much," Lily gently disagreed. "You have that same little crease that forms between your eyes when you're worrying or upset about something as you did when you were a kid, Sev."

Severus's hand reached for the spot on his face and felt the telltale crease and sighed.

"What's wrong?" Lily asked, coming closer.

"I was just wondering... Would you still love me if I had chosen differently?" Severus whispered.

"Chosen differently? What do you mean, Severus?"

"If I... If I had continued being friends with Mulciber and Avery and allowed myself to keep being into Dark Magic, and if our friendship hadn't survived-"

Lily silenced him with a finger to his lips. "Severus," she said sternly, "don't even think like that. You were so young, and yes, so you made some bad choices. So? I should think you'd realize by now that everything you've chosen to do since a few bad errors in judgment have more than made up for anything you could have done back then."

"But what if my errors in judgment, as you so benignly call them, had led to something worse?"

"But they didn't," Lily pointed out firmly. "Severus, why are you bringing this up?"

"Sometimes, I think I could have wound up on the other side of this war had I not been careful," Severus croaked.

"Hey, hey, Sev..." Lily said gently, taking him in her arms, concerned for him and determined to find out the deeper meaning behind his words eventually.

Although safe for now in her embrace, Severus felt he should have been the one comforting her. How much longer could Lily be so strong? How much longer could he keep the truth from her? If she knew, would she still feel the same about him?

That thought, which could become a reality, scared Severus more than any memory.

Chapter Eighty

After finishing at St. Mungo's that day in late July, Severus decided to take a detour to Diagon Alley to stock up on his potions stores. A quick foray into the apothecary fulfilled his wishes, and as he was walking down the main street, Severus passed a shop which sold all variety of magical devices. Usually, he ignored the shop's window, having no need for any such gadgets, thinking of Mad-Eye Moody's paranoid obsession with Dark Magic detectors, but in the window that day was an elaborate pensieve, much like the one Dumbledore kept locked in his office. Severus stopped and stared at the device.

On impulse, he stepped into the shop and found the section where Pensieves were kept. They ranged in size and ornateness. Severus's mind whirled, and his stomach clenched. He knew why having a Pensieve suddenly appealed to him. Picking up a simple one, he gazed at the stone basin, examining it for any defects.

Most regrettably, one of the shop's attendants took that opportunity to interrupt him.

"May I help you, young man?" the older gentleman inquired.

Nearly dropping the Pensieve, Severus turned and glared at whoever was addressing him. He noted the man's disapproving look.

"Be careful. If you break it-"

"Yes, I know," Severus said curtly. "I was intending on purchasing this one, anyway, so your assistance is unnecessary. Thank you."

With those clipped words, and feeling even more on edge, Severus strode away from the man and toward the counter to purchase the bloody thing. He ignored the cashier's quizzical expression at his purchase and was on his way.

Upon reaching Spinner's End, Severus placed the Pensieve on the coffee table in the sitting room and took a seat on the couch. Sighing, he gazed down into the bare bottom. He knew what must be done, and without further deliberation, Severus closed his eyes, willing himself to recall old memories he had long since wished forgotten,

and began extracting them, adding silvery thread after silvery thread to the basin. Apparently, any memory he had bestowed upon Harry Potter at his untimely demise had been fully restored, and whether for good or ill, only time would tell.

Severus avoided leaving the house that evening. Grateful Lily had her family to keep her company, Severus spent the rest of the evening and well into the night awake. He paced every room in the house. When he tried to sit and eat, even though he didn't feel hungry in the slightest, he pushed the plate away in distaste and stood again, returning to the Pensieve. Every so often, he would think of a memory he needed to add to the mix. He needed his story to be complete. If he was going to finally confess everything to Lily, she deserved to know it all. If he was going to marry her, she deserved all the more to know everything about his other life.

Severus was filled with anxiety and foreboding at the very thought of telling her, though. She would think him mental if he had merely tried to tell her with words, so the Pensieve was vital in the sharing. She would see everything. That couldn't be disputed. That many false memories couldn't be contrived.

*What if she no longer wishes to marry you after she knows the truth?
What if she even goes so far as to loathe you?*

Severus wouldn't, couldn't, force her to love him in return. As much as it would tear him apart, he knew he couldn't continue to live a lie. For the first time in a long, long while, Severus wondered if he would have been better staying dead. What good was a new life, another chance, if he wasted it again?

When the sun finally rose, Severus wasn't surprised. He didn't expect to be blessed with any sleep that night, but one small mercy was that today was a Saturday. He looked at himself in the mirror for the first time in a day and realized he looked a fright. He was likely to scare Lily before even having a chance to talk with her or show her those memories.

He somehow managed a quick shower and a change of clothes. Forcing himself to eat breakfast didn't help, and ten minutes later, he was vomiting the eggs and toast into the toilet. Flushing the contents

of his stomach away, Severus wished he could do the same with his previous life's memories. He had been a Death Eater, had been responsible for Lily's death, had spent years tormenting her son... How could she ever see beyond those awful things and see that he was a changed man?

Lily was due to come over any moment now. As was their custom on the weekend, they spent the entire time together, from early morning until after sunset. No doubt Lily was planning on another blissful day together, but she had no idea what she would be entering upon knocking at Severus's door that day.

Severus practically jumped out of his skin when the knock finally came. It was crazy how something he always looked forward to could bring him such pain. A part of him said it wasn't too late. He could still hide the pensieve and pretend everything was normal, but the larger part of him knew he would only be delaying the inevitable. Trying his best to compose himself, Severus approached the door and turned the knob.

Lily was standing there, offering him a wide and gorgeous smile. Her cheeks looked pink and warm, and her eyes glittered at him in the morning light.

"Hi, Sev," Lily greeted him, stepping toward the house.

Severus awkwardly stepped out of the way, letting her enter. He hesitated before taking her in his arms and murmuring, "Good morning, Lily."

When the embrace ended, Lily was giving Severus another concerned look, something she had been doing a lot lately.

"Sev, is something wrong?" she ventured.

"Lily, I... There's something I need to tell you."

Lily felt her stomach drop and her insides go cold. She didn't like the tone of his voice one bit.

"Is- is it the wedding?" she asked softly. "Are you having second thoughts? If you are, we can get married later." Her words were coming out faster and faster as she grew more nervous.

Severus silenced her with a finger pressed gently to her lips.

"No, Lily. I love you as much as I *a/ways* have," he stressed. "Please come into the sitting room..."

Lily followed him into said room and immediately noticed the Pensieve sitting on the table.

Amazed in spite of herself, Lily stepped close to the basin and gazed down into its contents, unable to decipher any single memory, as there were too many.

"Is that- ?" she started to ask.

"Yes, it's a Pensieve," Severus said shakily. "When I told you I needed to tell you something, I decided it might be better if I show you."

Having only read about dipping into someone else's memories, Lily gaped. "What do you have to show me that you can't just tell me, Sev?" she whispered, a little frightened.

"I'll be with you, Lily... please," Severus almost begged. His eyes were starting to take on a glassy quality, and alarmed by his behavior, Lily took his hand.

"All right," she said steadily. "Whenever you're ready..."

Severus knew she was putting forth a strong front in the face of uncertainty. He grasped her hand harder than usual, and together, they entered the Pensieve...

"Leave him ALONE!" the Lily in the memory yelled.

The Severus in the memory glanced in the direction of her voice, and his black eyes settled upon her.

James and Sirius were also looking around. James's free hand jumped, much to Severus's dismay, to his hair. He purposefully messed it up.

"All right, Evans?" said James, trying to sound mature and impressive.

"Leave him alone," Lily repeated. She was looking at James with every sign of great dislike. "What's he done to you?"

"Well," said James, appearing to deliberate the point, "it's more the fact that he *exists*, if you know what I mean..."

Many of the surrounding watchers laughed, Sirius and Wormtail included, but Lupin, still apparently intent on his book, didn't, and neither did Lily.

"You think you're funny," she said coldly. "But you're just an arrogant, bullying toerag, Potter. Leave him *alone*."

The real Severus chanced a glance at the real Lily and saw that she was amused by the memory, at least at this point because of her name-calling toward James.

"I will if you go out with me, Evans," said James quickly. "Go on... Go out with me, and I'll never lay a wand on old Snivelly again."

The Impediment Jinx wearing off memory-Severus now. He inched toward his wand, spitting out soupsuds as he crawled.

"I wouldn't go out with you if it was a choice between you and the giant squid," said Lily.

Here, the real Lily actually laughed. "I sure told him, didn't I, Sev?"

Severus nodded muted, his stomach turning over, knowing what was coming.

"Bad luck, Prongs," said Sirius briskly, turning back to memory-Severus. "OY!"

Severus had directed his wand straight at James, slashing his cheek. James recovered too quickly. Memory-Severus was now hanging upside down in the air, his robes falling over his head, and his skinny, pallid legs and greying underpants were being displayed for the audience.

Many people in the small crowd watching cheered. Sirius, James, and Wormtail roared with laughter.

Memory-Lily's voice came again: "Let him down!"

Certainly," said James, and he jerked his wand upward. Severus fell into a crumpled heap on the ground. Disentangling himself from his robes, he got quickly to his feet, wand up, but Sirius said, "Locomotor mortis!" and Severus keeled over again at once, rigid as a board.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!" Lily shouted. She had her own wand out now. James and Sirius eyed it warily.

"Ah, Evans, don't make me hex you," said James earnestly.

"Take the curse off him, then!"

James sighed deeply, then turned to Severus and muttered the countercurse.

"There you go," he said, as Severus struggled to his feet again. "You're lucky Evans was here, Snivellus -"

Then came the line Severus dreaded...

"I don't need help from filthy little Mudbloods like her!"

Memory-Lily blinked, as did the real Lily. The real Severus couldn't bear to meet her eyes and so stared at the ground, ashamed. He wanted to hex his old self to hell and back for that unforgivable comment.

"Fine," the Lily in the memory was saying coolly. "I won't bother in future. And I'd wash your pants if I were you, *Snivellus*."

"Wait a minute!" the real Lily interrupted. "I'd *never* call you that awful name, Sev, and you'd never called me a- a Mud-"

"Don't say that word. Please, Lily," Severus implored.

"But I don't understand," Lily said, perplexed. "That isn't what happened."

"Just wait a moment," Severus murmured distantly. "There's more you need to see yet."

The memory faded away, and they watched as memory-Severus stood outside the entrance to the Gryffindor common room. The memory-Lily stepped out of the portal, appearing hurt and dejected.

"I'm sorry."

Severus watched his pathetic attempt at an apology.

"I'm not interested."

He forced himself to keep watching. He didn't deserve forgiveness, but beside him, Lily took his hand.

"I'm sorry!"

Severus heard Lily gasp.

"Save your breath."

"Shut up, you!" the real Lily yelled at her counterpart. "Look at him! He's sorry, and you're being heartless."

The Lily in the memory continued on, oblivious to the other Lily.

"I only came out because Mary told me you were threatening to sleep here."

"I was. I would have done. I never meant to call you Mudblood, it just-"

"Slipped out?" Lily asked without pity. "It's too late. I've made excuses for you for years. None of my friends can understand why I even talk to you. You and your precious little Death Eater friends - you see, you don't even deny it! You don't even deny that's what you're all aiming to be! You can't wait to join You-Know-Who, can you?"

Severus watched his dejected self open his mouth and close it without speaking.

"I can't pretend anymore. You've chosen your way, I've chosen mine."

"No - listen, I didn't mean-"

"-to call me Mudblood? But you call everyone of my birth Mudblood, Severus. Why should I be any different?"

Severus wished to punch his pitiful self for just standing there and not finding the words as Lily turned, glared at him, and stepped back through the portrait hole.

Severus watched the scene disappear in front of them, and he turned to watch Lily. Tears were streaming freely down her cheeks.

"Severus, what- ? I'd never do that to you! Abandon you like that, even if you had called me a Mudblood, which you never did. What kind of twisted perversion is this? What are you showing me? Was I Obliviated and no one told me?" Lily demanded.

"Something you must see to understand," Severus replied softly, and Lily saw that his face, too, was liberally lined with tears. "I would tell you more, but the next memory is coming, and it only gets worse. I hate myself for putting you through this, Lily; I do, but you must understand."

Before Lily could muster a reply, the scene changed once again. Lily watched in horror as the Severus in the memory bowed down before Lord Voldemort and graciously accepted the Dark Mark. The young man in front of her looked so much like the one standing next to her, only his hair was long like she had known it to be until recently. His face was set in stone and constantly cruel and hungry for power, and it scared Lily to her lowest depths.

The words exchanged between the other Severus and the Dark Lord were lost to her as she gazed upon the man standing next to her.

"Severus, please, you *must* tell me what this means," she begged, her voice breaking. "Take me away from this. Make it stop!"

"I'm sorry, Lily," Severus replied brokenly, "but I'm afraid you haven't seen the worst of it."

They were now witnessing Severus as he crept along a darkened hallway. Although Lily didn't know where they were, Severus knew all too well. He watched his other self in disgust and hatred as the young man pressed his ear to the door. From inside the room, Sibyll Trelawney was uttering the prophecy, and a moment later, Aberforth Dumbledore was roughly grabbing Severus by the collar, and the door to the room was open, a very startled Albus Dumbledore gazing at the young man who had been listening at the door.

"I was... I was just on my way," the Severus in the memory feebly offered. "I couldn't find the right room."

He hastily shrugged out of Aberforth's grip and ran out of the Hog's Head.

Lily was completely confused by this memory, but figuring she would know soon enough, as another memory always followed, she witnessed the most startling memory yet.

Severus appeared slightly older in this memory, and he was panting and turning on the spot wildly, his eyes huge and searching. His hair was flying about him madly.

A blinding light came, like lightning, and the memory-Severus was on his knees.

"Don't kill me!"

"That was not my intention."

Lily stepped closer, intrigued despite the darkness and wind all around them.

"Well, Severus?" Dumbledore asked. "What message does Lord Voldemort have for me?"

"No - no message - I'm here on my own account!"

Lily thought Severus appeared a little mad.

"I - I come with a warning - no, a request - please-"

Dumbledore flicked his wand, and silence fell around them, despite the continuing rustle of leaves.

"What request could a Death Eater make of me?"

"The - the prophecy... the prediction... Trelawney..."

"Ah, yes," said Dumbledore. "How much did you relay to Lord Voldemort?"

"Everything - everything I heard!" said Severus. "That is why - it is for that reason - he thinks it means Lily Evans!"

Here, Lily gasped and took a step back in shock.

"The prophecy did not refer to a woman," said Dumbledore. "It spoke of a boy born at the end of July-"

"You know what I mean! He thinks it means her son, he is going to hunt her down - kill them all-"

"If she means so much to you," said Dumbledore, "surely Lord Voldemort will spare her? Could you not ask for mercy for the mother, in exchange for the son?"

"I have - I have asked him-"

The real Severus cringed, despising himself. Lily choked back a sob.

"You disgust me," said Dumbledore with such contempt, and Severus didn't blame the old man. He was disgusted with his other self, with his current self. Lily was looking desperately between the two Severuses, wanting an answer.

"You do not care, then, about the death of her husband and child? They can die, as long as you have what you want?" Dumbledore was asking.

Memory-Severus said nothing and kept looking at Dumbledore.

"Hide them all, then," he finally croaked. "Keep her - them - safe. Please."

"And what will you give me in return, Severus?"

"In - in return?"

There was a long pause.

"Anything."

Horried, Lily turned to Severus and angrily, desperately pounded at his chest.

"Severus, enough!" she bellowed, choking on sobs. "Is this something Dumbledore came up with? Is this a part of his twisted schemes you're always telling me about?"

Severus shook his head wordlessly, silent tears coursing down his cheeks. His eyes were transfixed on the broken heap of a man now in the chair in Dumbledore's office.

"I thought... you were going... to keep her... safe..."

"She and James put their faith in the wrong person," said Dumbledore. "Rather like you, Severus. Weren't you hoping that Lord Voldemort would spare her?"

Both the real Severus and memory-Severus's breathing were shallow.

"Her boy survives," said Dumbledore.

Severus sighed as he watched himself in anguish, knowing it was a lost cause to try to talk any sense into him at that stage.

"My son lives?" Lily whispered, confused. "A son I never had?"

"Her son lives," Dumbledore continued. "He has her eyes, precisely her eyes. You remember the shape and color of Lily Evans's eyes, I am sure?"

"DON'T!" bellowed Severus in the memory. "Gone... dead..."

Lily literally jumped and whimpered, afraid.

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

"I wish... I wish / were dead..."

"No, you don't," Lily said gently, wishing to reach out to the young man suffering in the chair.

Severus blinked, his mouth open in admiration. He wanted to ask her how she could be so forgiving, so compassionate, even now.

"And what use would that be to anyone?" said Dumbledore coldly. "If you loved Lily Evans, if you truly loved her, then your way forward is clear."

Severus watched himself as he peered through a haze of pain, but he knew Dumbledore's words had reached him eventually.

"What - what do you mean?"

"You know how and why she died. Make sure it was not in vain. Help me protect Lily's son."

"He does not need protection. The Dark Lord has gone-"

"The Dark Lord will return, and Harry Potter will be in terrible danger when he does."

"Potter?" Lily asked.

Severus nodded. "You married him."

"What?"

But after a pause, the Severus in the memory gained control of himself and uttered, "Very well. Very well. But never - never tell, Dumbledore! This must be between us! Swear it! I cannot bear... especially Potter's son... I want your word!"

"My word, Severus, that I shall never reveal the best of you?" Dumbledore sighed, looking down into Severus's anguished face. "If you insist..."

"And I did," Severus murmured weakly as the scene dissolved.

"ENOUGH!" Lily suddenly shrieked. "This is madness! Utter madness! What the bloody hell is that supposed to mean? You are responsible f-for my death? But I'm not dead, Severus! I'm right here! Do you hear me? And what's this about me being married to James Potter and having a son with him? Tell me!"

Severus heard her, but what could he say? There was still more...

Severus wished to hold Lily, but she was a complete mess. Hiccupping, she blinked as she watched and listened to Dumbledore giving memory-Severus specific instructions about Harry Potter. They were in the headmaster's office once again, and Dumbledore was explaining in great detail how Lily's sacrifice had given Harry protection, Voldemort's Killing Curse rebounding upon himself, and a part of Voldemort's soul latching itself onto Harry.

"So the boy... the boy must die?" said Severus quiet calmly, but the real Severus knew he had been anything but.

"And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential."

After a long silence, memory-Severus said, "I thought... all these years... that we were protecting him for her. For Lily."

The real Severus turned away in disgust at Dumbledore's words that followed, and Lily was horrified to hear the old man speak so prosaically about the boy who was supposed to be her son.

"You have kept him alive so that he can die at the right moment?" memory-Severus demanded, horrified.

"Don't be shocked, Severus. How many men and women have you watched die?"

"Lately, only those whom I could not save," said Severus, and he stood. "You have used me."

"You *have* used him," Lily shot at Dumbledore's deaf ears.

"Meaning?"

"I have spied for you and lied for you, put myself in mortal danger for you. Everything was supposed to be to keep Lily Potter's son safe. Now you tell me you have been raising him like a pig for slaughter -"

"But this is touching, Severus," said Dumbledore seriously. "Have you grown to care for the boy, after all?"

"For *him*?" shouted Severus. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

A beautiful silver doe erupted from the end of Severus's wand and landed on the office floor, bounded across the office, and out the window.

"After all this time?" Dumbledore asked, tears in his eyes.

"Always."

Severus felt his chest constrict. Had he *now* grown to care for Harry, even though he no longer existed?

Now, Lily was quietly sobbing into her hands, whether driven crazy or somehow actually touched by the past scene, Severus didn't know. He withdrew from her some, knowing he had no comfort to give.

One more memory remained...

A boy who looked remarkably like James Potter was leaning over a fallen figure on the floor of a shack. Withdrawing her hands from her face, Lily took a tentative step toward the pair.

The man on the floor was dying, weakly seizing the front of the boy's robes. A terrible rapsing, gurgling noise came from the dying man, and Lily gasped, realizing she knew him.

"Take... it... Take... it..."

Silvery threads of memory were leaking out of the man's mouth, ears, and eyes, and suddenly, a bushy-haired girl appeared seemingly out of nowhere and thrust a flask into the boy's hands. The memories were placed inside it.

The man's hold on the boy slackened as he turned deathly white.

"Look... at... me..." he whispered.

Lily cried something incoherent in her sobs and reached out to the dead man on the floor. Rushing to his side, she gazed down upon him and looked back at Severus.

"Is this you, Severus? This shattered and now lifeless man? But he is older than you... You are alive; he is not."

Unable to comprehend why, Lily wept for the man lying at her side. Severus turned away, feeling to watch would be indecent. The final memory faded, and they were back in the sitting room at Spinner's End.

Lily was still weeping. Shocked to see the body gone, she sniffed and wiped at her eyes.

"Please tell me that isn't true," Lily whispered. Somehow along the way, the dawning realization that these memories couldn't be faked had hit Lily. Although she didn't understand how it was possible, she felt she might be ill from the truth.

"No, it's not real... It's not possible," Lily uttered, trying to convince herself in vain. Turning accusatory eyes upon Severus, she yelled, "TELL ME THE TRUTH, SEVERUS! PLEASE!" Grabbing hold of Severus's collar, she was shaking him. Her resolve weakened, and she buried her face in his shirt, sobbing. Breaking down further, she dropped to her knees on the floor.

Severus forced his eyes meet hers. It was sheer agony to watch the woman he loved fall apart in front of him, but she deserved the truth and for him to look at her.

"Lily," he croaked, "you cannot begin to understand how very sorry I am that I put you through this. Words are worthless, and had I simply explained the truth to you, you would have thought me mental. Those memories are real, I'm afraid... each and every one. They are... from another lifetime." He crouched down next to her, afraid to touch her, lest she pull away.

"Another lifetime?" Lily echoed in disbelief.

"Memories cannot lie. If they are altered, you would know it, and you know that nothing was done to change those memories. What you witnessed was the truth of what happened in my first life... I betrayed you, Lily," Severus whispered in utter shame, now fully crying. "I didn't mean to... but I didn't listen to you when you begged me not to be friends with Avery and Mulciber. I finally drove you away, as you saw, and from then on, I went down a dark path. I joined the Death Eaters and overheard a prophecy that targeted your son as the one being marked by the Dark Lord to have the power to vanquish him. I didn't know it meant your son, but when I found out who the prophecy was about, fearing for your life, I went to Dumbledore and begged him to protect you... and your family. I turned spy for Dumbledore in that moment. You married Potter... James. Your son was Harry Potter, who had your eyes, but otherwise looked like James. The Dark Lord killed you as you protected your son, and out of my love for you, I protected your son for years, even though I hated him for being Potter's son. In the final battle at Hogwarts, which was in 1998, I was killed by the Dark Lord. I gave my memories to your son, so he would finally know the truth: that I had always loved you and protected him because of that love. After I left that existence, Dumbledore greeted me in the afterlife and began speaking of something that sounded like absolute nonsense. He said I was being given another chance... to relive my life. I 'woke up' on that day at the end of fifth year when Potter and his friends were tormenting me."

"And the flying, the Occlumency, how skilled you are at Defense, knowing Vernon Dursley's name... that's all because you already knew those things?" Lily asked, shocked beyond belief.

"Yes, everything," Severus whispered. "No one knows but you now. Dumbledore suspected, as you know. He had reason to..."

Trying to take in everything and understand it, Lily finally said, "I believe you, but I... Severus, what can I say? If this is true, that you went Dark before... and you told You-Know-Who about a prophecy that resulted in my death? But you... you protected my son, a son I know nothing of."

"I do not blame you if you hate me," Severus said in a trembling voice. "You have every right to walk out that door and never look back. I was a disgrace then, and I am now. I've lied to you for two years, but I felt you deserved to know the truth. I do love you beyond comprehension, Lily, but I would not bind you to me in marriage out of selfishness. You are free of me if you wish it."

It felt like a multitude of stabs to the heart to say those words, but Severus couldn't put the love of his life in a cage.

Lily stepped closer to him and gazed upon him, her face a mixture of sadness, compassion, hurt, and anger. She placed a hand on his cheek and held his gaze for a long time.

"Severus, what has happened to you?" she asked softly.

He blinked, and a rebel tear fell.

She leaned in and kissed it away.

"I love you, but I... Is that enough? Right now, I just don't know."

She withdrew her hand from his face and was gone. Severus stood there for what could have been forever, the ghost of her touch left burning his skin, a shadow overcoming him.

He had no more tears to shed.

Author's Note: Certain passages were taken (and altered) from "Snape's Worst Memory" in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* and from "The Elder Wand" and "The Prince's Tale" in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

This is my longest chapter yet, although a lot of that is thanks to Jo's words in the original text. What a fun and challenging chapter to write, though! I hope I did it justice: Severus telling Lily the truth! He had to at some point!

Chapter Eighty-One

The moment Lily stepped out of Severus's house, she paused and turned, facing the door. The curtains were drawn closed, as usual, so she couldn't see him standing, desolate and alone, in the sitting room, but she knew he was just on the other side of that wall. She placed a hand on the surface of the door and closed her eyes, sighing and feeling fresh tears forcing their way out from under her eyelids.

One knock. One turn of the handle. It was so simple, and yet so difficult. She could return to him in an instant. Instead, Lily withdrew from the house. She didn't want to return home, so she headed for the park where she had played numerous times as a child.

She kept walking, oblivious to everything else, and entered the glade where she and Severus had first gotten to know each other. The tall grass tickled her bare knees she was walked through it, and she reached down, letting her fingers grace the tips of the blades softly. Finding her favorite spot under a large maple, she sat and stared ahead.

She imagined the eccentric little boy in the patched, too-short trousers and overlarge coat sitting across from her. His eyes were excited and lit up as he made big, sweeping gestures with his small hands, explaining in great detail the wizarding world, answering every question of hers with fervor. His face was animated and so alive, and every time she spoke his name, the worry on his young visage would immediately fade, and he would give her one of his glorious smiles. He was an impressive boy, despite his appearance, and she was captured. How could he not be anything but endearing?

But just as soon as Lily remembered the boy Severus had once been, she saw him age drastically, and the pain and anguish on his face bespoke more than she could begin to comprehend. He had told her that he had died in 1998, so he had been thirty-eight in that last memory. She shivered, even though it was a hot summer day. He had looked older, but she supposed if his life had even been half as awful as those memories had depicted, he would look ragged and worn. It was weird to know that she had been in the company of

someone much mentally older than her, but he was still Severus. The age difference didn't matter.

Sitting here now, slightly removed from the situation, Lily tried to wrap her mind around the possibility. Sure, she lived in a magical world, but that didn't mean she thought *anything* was possible. What she experienced in the Pensieve defied rational explanation. How could Severus be reliving his life? She didn't understand, but she believed, and for now, that would have to suffice.

Everything she had witnessed had been emotional and informational overload. Now, Lily was left trying to process it all. Some of the facts seemed ridiculous, and because her emotions were so raw, she almost laughed out loud at the thought of marrying James. All she could think of regarding him was how he had fancied her for years and how she had never returned the sentiment, even if he had been charming in his own way. As for the son, Harry, what could she say? Or feel? The natural maternal instinct in her felt warmed at the thought of a son, and she had wanted to protect the boy in the memories. Knowing she had died protecting him, Lily knew she would do the same in this existence if her son, whoever the father might be, were placed in danger.

But why had Severus hated the boy? She didn't know details, but he had told her it was because this Harry was James's son. What and who had Severus become? Lily knew that answer. She saw the man he was today, and she knew that everything from before had to have had a profound effect on him. How could it not?

He died, for heaven's sake! If dying alone wouldn't impact someone, what would? But for Severus... he said he never stopped loving me, in spite of everything he did wrong. He died protecting this unknown son... and he's been trying so very hard to be honorable and true ever since... ever since the end of fifth year.

Hindsight was a brilliant thing. Thinking back, Lily realized the dramatic change in Severus after that incident with the Marauders out by the lake. She had thought he had simply turned over a new leaf, but what had been the impetus? Now she knew.

A part of her was angered at him for keeping the truth from her for so long. Especially lately, she had asked him if anything was wrong, but he had denied it again and again. Now she knew what had been on his mind, probably constantly. He had lied to her for two whole years, and that hurt. Then again, this bombshell wasn't something Severus could have simply revealed over a cup of tea on a nice day. Had he told her too soon, she knew she would have been scared more than she was currently, but would she have run?

Lily hoped not.

She had left him only to have some space and time to think. In that moment, Lily prayed Severus wasn't beating himself up, believing she had left him forever. She knew he was strong, but how much could one man take?

Tired of thinking, Lily let herself cry until she found herself drained to the point of emptiness.

Finally standing, Lily breathed in deeply and exhaled, willing herself to return home. She needed some time away from Severus. She had only just begun to process this new information, and right now, all she wanted to do was sleep. She could no longer think.

Upon entering her house, though, Petunia noticed her. Lily gave her sister a half-hearted wave and headed up the stairs, hoping Petunia wouldn't follow, but Petunia was naturally curious.

"What's the matter?" Petunia asked once they were upstairs in Lily's room.

"Nothing," Lily replied, but her voice was ragged, and her eyes were still red.

"You've been crying," Petunia stated, crossing the room to examine her sister. "You went to Severus's house. What happened? Did he hurt you?"

Lily could hear the distrust and accusatory tone of her sister's voice growing. She sighed. "N-no, it's fine, Petunia. You know Severus wouldn't hurt me."

"Then why are you upset?"

"Can we please not talk about this?" Lily asked warily.

"You're supposed to be marrying him in two weeks, Lily, and if he's being a prat, I think I have a right to know. Are you *sure* marrying him is the right thing to do if he's capable of hurting you like this?"

"Stop being nosy, Petunia!" Lily snapped, now annoyed.

"Fine," Petunia said in clipped tones. She went to the door, but stopped and turned. "You know, Lily. I wasn't trying to 'be nosy,' as you put it. Maybe if you weren't so caught up with Severus all the time, you'd realize that other people do care. If he has done something to hurt you, I swear-"

"I'm sorry," Lily whispered. "It's just been a really bad morning. I don't think I'll ever be able to really talk about it."

Petunia eyed her sister, concerned. "Just... don't do anything stupid, Lily."

Petunia then did turn the knob and exit. Lily dropped onto the bed, removed her shoes, and crawled under the covers, pulling them snugly around her body.

Lying on her side, her eyes rested on the picture perched on the nightstand next to the bed. She was with Severus, but they weren't moving, as it was a Muggle photograph. The picture had been taken during their first summer. They had become instant friends, and each child eyed the other with wonder. They were by a small lake, and Severus was dressed as he had been in her vision of him earlier.

Just when she thought she had no more tears to shed, the hot saltiness coursed quickly down her cheek. Lily reached for the picture and gazed upon it, wishing she could return to those times, before everything had become so complicated.

She cried for the boy in that picture and for the man he had become, but they were the same person.

"I love you, Sev," Lily whispered. "That has to be enough."

Determined she would talk with him tomorrow, Lily held the picture to her heart and closed her eyes.

x x x x x

After Lily left, Severus stood in the same spot for a long time. He wished time would stop, but time was cruel and kept ticking away. Her last gentle touch could have been a death kiss, and the sound of the door closing could have been a resounding bang, shattering the already broken pieces of his heart.

But Severus could no longer cry.

Tears were worthless. He had already paid a high enough price for them, but they gave nothing of value. Despite his efforts, when the moment of truth came, Severus knew everything he felt worth something in his life was because of Lily. If she never returned, he doubted he would have the resolve to continue on.

He felt very much like his old, embittered self, but seeing his wand, he did something he oftentimes did when he was feeling particularly alone and sorry for himself. Going to one of the armchairs, he sat and forced himself to think of something happy: their first day together as friends.

"Expecto Patronum," he uttered, and a wispy silvery thread erupted from the tip of his wand, taking form.

Standing in front of him was a beautiful doe. When Lily had been long dead and he was at his lowest, he could always muster a small spark of joy to produce the symbol of his love for her. He had felt Lily's calming presence in the silver doe, and as the doe's eyes gazed back at him, they were nonjudgmental and soft.

Severus reached out a hand. The doe briefly nuzzled his palm, and he ran his hand over the animal's semi-solid head.

"You'll never leave me, will you?" he asked the doe. "But what about Lily? She told me she never would leave my side, but that was before she knew the truth about me..."

The doe began to fade and then disappeared completely. Severus could have summoned another, but decided against it. Instead, he leaned back in the chair and stared at the cracks in the ceiling. The plaster was breaking off in some areas, and a stain from when the toilet had overflowed years ago still marked the ceiling. It was ugly and falling apart and blocking his view of the clear sky outside.

He felt like that ceiling.

"Do you hate me so much?" Severus asked no one in particular. "Why the hell did you give me another chance to live? So you could laugh at me? See what a failure I'd be all over again? Well, I hope you're satisfied! If you do hate me, why not just end it already and damn me to hell!"

A curious thing happened then, just as Severus was expecting silence to be the response to his desperate plea. The window suddenly flew upon, and a burst of wind entered, wrapped its way around him. Severus could have sworn he smelled Lily's vanilla fragrance in it. The breeze was gentle, hardly a whisper on his flesh, but it brushed past the same spot on his cheek where Lily had kissed him.

Then the wind was gone.

Severus stood and gazed out the open window. No one was near. Closing the window, he secured it and jerked the curtains shut, convincing himself that what had just happened had merely been a freak occurrence.

If only Severus realized that because he had enough joy to summon his Patronus, he could also believe Lily would return.

The next day, she did.

Severus had succumbed to taking a whole bottle of Dreamless Sleep Potion to knock him out for several hours, not wishing to turn to

alcohol like his father to drown himself in his troubles. When Lily knocked at the door, Severus wasn't awake to hear it, so she Apparated into the house, the wards set to permit only Severus or her.

Fearing for the worst, Lily called, his voice cracking, "Severus!"

When no reply came, she made her way up the stairs. The door to his room was shut, but when she jiggled the knob, she found it unlocked. Upon entering the room, relief flooded through her at seeing his sleeping form.

"Severus, wake up," Lily said, gently shaking him.

When he continued to slumber, Lily grew worried. Her eyes fell on the empty vial next to the bed, and she mentally cursed. She hoped he had the antidote in the bathroom, as it would take many more hours for the potion's effects to wear off.

Lily quickly returned to the short hallway and went into the bathroom. She opened the cabinet and sorted through numerous vials, a mixture of Muggle medicine and potions. She smiled when she found what she was seeking. Knowing Severus like she did, a brilliant potions brewer would always have his shelves stocked.

"Thank you, Severus," she murmured, holding the vial carefully between both hands.

Kneeling at the side of the bed, Lily took one hand and placed it behind his head, gingerly lifting it off the pillow. She tipped the contents of the vial down his mouth and massaged his throat. Severus swallowed by reflex. A few seconds later, Severus's eyes opened, blinking several times as he focused on Lily.

"Lily?" he rasped.

Lily conjured a glass and some water and handed it to him. "Perhaps you had better drink something, Severus."

Severus gratefully took the offering and drank down the entire glass. Lily was smoothing the hair on his forehead away from his face, her motions tender and slow.

"Your hair is getting long again, Sev," she said with a smile.

"Not that long yet," Severus murmured.

"Soon it will be long and beautiful again, not that it isn't lovely now. I will be here to see it grow, to run my hands through your long locks again."

"You- you will?" Severus asked, feeling his eyes sting. "Lily, I... I thought I had lost you... again."

"Never, Sev." Lily leaned in and kissed him sweetly on the lips. She joined him on the bed and wrapped her arms around him. Severus, thinking this had to be a dream, slowly embraced her, wishing to hold on to her, lest he awaken and find himself alone again.

"I must admit... I have a million questions, and I'm confused as hell," Lily continued, "but you are Severus; whether you are the boy I first met or the man who died in that memory, you are all of those to me. After what I saw yesterday, I was hurt you had kept a secret so big from me, but I understand why you did. Your other life was... Sev, it was horrible."

"But it's my fault, Lily," Severus weakly protested. "Didn't you see? I betrayed you in so many ways. It doesn't matter that I died protecting your son-"

"It matters to me, Severus," Lily stated firmly. "I can plainly see that you are undeniably sorry for your past actions, and I believe you have more than made up for anything you could have done. Those things you shared with me didn't happen to *me* in the here and now. Had you not shown me, I would have never known, but what you did took tremendous courage. You risked everything because your love for me is that true, that deep. If anything, Sev, it only made me realize how much more I do love you."

"Lily, you can't possibly-"

"Severus, if you must hear me say in words what I've been trying to convey, then let me set the record straight: I forgive you. All right? You're forgiven for anything you could have done wrong."

"You- you can't forgive me," Severus insisted, now withdrawing from her and sitting up.

"I have, and I would, no matter how many times it takes for you to realize it," Lily stated firmly. "Now you need to learn to forgive yourself."

"That's impossible," Severus spat bitterly.

"Not true," Lily disagreed. "If you haven't at least partially forgiven yourself, then how have you managed to do so much good, in both of your lives?"

Severus was at a loss for words.

"Severus, you *must* forgive yourself," Lily implored. "You are capable of such profound love, devotion, loyalty, and bravery. You have no idea the depths of your worth."

"I am none of those things," Severus said sullenly. "I am petty and shallow. I hated your son, Lily. I made his life miserable. I held a grudge for years. How is that anything good?"

"You said he looked like James. Is that all there was to it?" Lily questioned.

"That was only on the surface. Because I'd lost you to Potter, I saw your son as a living representation of a unity of someone I loved and someone I hated. He seemed like someone sent into the world just to mock me, to be a constant reminder of where I had failed. I was determined from the beginning to only see his father in him, but the person I really hated was myself. I projected my insecurities onto a boy who had done nothing to deserve such treatment."

"And yet you protected him. Because you loved me?"

"Of course!" Severus exclaimed. "Everything I did was because of you."

"Did you not do good because you felt it was the right thing to do, then?"

"At first, I had only my guilt of betraying you to drive me, but... with time, I-"

"Yes?" Lily prodded, hopeful Severus would come to the conclusion that he had, in fact, done good for the right reasons.

"I did more than just protect Harry Potter. I worked as a spy for Dumbledore and the Order. I wanted to see the Dark Lord taken down. Even though it was my fault for telling him the prophecy, he was the one who ultimately killed you. Dumbledore asked me to protect the children at the school after he was gone, and I did so to the best of my abilities."

"After he was gone? What happened to him?"

Severus swallowed nervously. "He was already dying the year before the final battle. He had foolishly placed a cursed ring on his finger. As for why, I don't know, but I was able to confine the curse to his hand for a time. The Dark Lord had given the task of murdering the headmaster to a student. You know of Lucius Malfoy?"

Lily nodded.

"It was his son. As punishment for Lucius's failures, the Dark Lord gave this task to Draco, his son, never truly thinking he could do it. When I discussed this with Dumbledore, he told me I needed to kill him."

Lily gasped. "Why would he demand such a thing?"

"There were multiple reasons. He didn't want Draco to become a killer. He needed me to show my supposed 'true colors' to the Dark Lord and be taken further into the fold. Dumbledore was already dying, anyway, so he was living on borrowed time. It was a mercy killing, but I hated him for asking it of me. No one else would have been able to do it. I cannot believe I did."

"That's horrible!" Lily exclaimed, outraged and disturbed. "Dumbledore asking you to kill him! It's no wonder you don't trust him. He didn't even seem to show you much compassion when you were grieving over my death."

"Dumbledore had his own agenda in the war. I never felt like he trusted me, even though he claimed he did. He never revealed his plans for how he was bringing down the Dark Lord, only telling me that a part of the Dark Lord's soul resided inside Harry Potter and that I was to be the one to tell him this at a crucial time. I still don't understand what it all meant. I gave your son the information he needed, and although my time in the afterlife was brief, I did learn from Dumbledore that Harry Potter defeated the Dark Lord."

"You mean, You-Know-Who can't just be killed like anyone else? And this unknown son of mine could have been killed? Dumbledore used Harry Potter as a pawn?!" Lily asked, frightened and incredulous.

"Harry Potter had a knack for surviving in extreme circumstances. Dumbledore may have been brutal, but he wasn't heartless. He cared deeply for the boy, and with all Dumbledore's cleverness and cunning, I know his plan would have played out for victory, as he had placed the pieces on the chessboard just right. As for the Dark Lord, no, he cannot die like a normal wizard, and he did tell his followers that he had taken certain precautions to avoid dying. He had done this before your sacrifice. He was resurrected thirteen years later, having never properly died."

Lily sighed. "Well, I'm just glad Harry was finally able to defeat that bastard." She paused, then inquired, "Is it possible to figure out how to defeat You-Know-Who?"

"Perhaps..." Severus trailed off thoughtfully. Somewhere along the way, their conversation had drifted, and realizing this, Severus said, "But getting back to what needs to be discussed now, Lily, are you certain you still want to be with me?"

Lily took his hands in earnest. "Yes."

"But you said yesterday that you didn't know if love was enough."

"It is. It has to be. I saw what your love could do, the man you have become. You have done many great things, Severus, and I hope you can learn to forgive yourself in time."

"I don't-"

"Severus, please," Lily implored.

He sighed. "For you, I will try."

Lily smiled, feeling herself calming. There was a pause, then Lily asked, "Sev, why did you join the Death Eaters?"

"It was... Lily, it wasn't something that just happened overnight. You already know some of the people I was 'friends' with. Lucius Malfoy took an interest in me from the time I was Sorted. I was surrounded by the pressures in Slytherin, and I stupidly let their beliefs influence mine. When I lost your friendship, I think I lost the decent part of myself. Without you, I only had people like Mulciber to turn to, and when you started dating Potter in seventh year, that was pretty much the last straw. I knew you would never look at me the same again. After Hogwarts, I took the Mark, believing I could prove myself to be powerful, influential, gain respect, and finally get my revenge on people like Potter and my father who had put me down for years."

Lily's mouth was gaping at his explanation. "Did you... did you do anything bad? What did you witness?"

"That's not something you really want to know, Lily," Severus stated warily. "Trust me."

"Severus," Lily said sternly, "I think I do have a right to know. You've told me so much already, shown me so much. I do love you, but I deserve to know the man I'm marrying."

"Yes, you do," Severus admitted ashamedly. "That's why I told you the truth. But you... you would still truly have me in marriage after you know all this?"

"Nothing you tell me is going to change how I feel about you, Sev," Lily said gently. "You are not the person you were when you joined the Death Eaters. You have come so far, but please, I need to know."

"Yes, I did horrible things, Lily. I saw many people die, killed mercilessly by the Death Eaters. Some of them enjoyed tormenting their victims first. I was put in charge of brewing poisons, so most of my victims weren't direct. The Dark Lord used me as a spy as well,

so when I turned spy for Dumbledore, I already had mastered Occlumency. I simply turned it on my old master."

"Did you ever kill anyone... besides Dumbledore?" Lily whispered.

"Not directly, no, but I just as well might have. I was only a true Death Eater for a little over a year, but then I heard the prophecy, and things changed. Most of my assignments involved spying, as I told you. When I was a double agent, I had to be very careful with the information I gave. The Dark Lord wished for me to procure the Defense Against the Dark Arts position at Hogwarts and spy on Dumbledore, but I went to Dumbledore on my own and begged him to protect you by that point. Dumbledore eventually gave me the position as Potions master, although that was shortly before you and your family were attacked. I don't think he ever fully trusted me with Defense."

"I still am having a hard time with all this," Lily admitted. "It's just beyond my ability to understand. How did you get another chance at life? I mean, do you know how it works, exactly?"

Shaking his head, Severus replied, "All I know is that Dumbledore greeted me in the afterlife. We spoke briefly. He told me I was being given the chance to relive my life and asked me if I would have chosen differently if given the opportunity. I told him that of course I would have! How I longed to have you by my side, and I'd lived the rest of my meagre life without you, bitter and jaded, hating myself and the world. Suddenly, I blinked, and then I was back in my younger body, and Potter was coming at me."

"So... how old are you really, then?" Lily asked curiously.

"I'm not sure how that works," Severus said. "I was thirty-eight when I died, and it's been two more years. Does that make me mentally forty? I don't know. Does... does that bother you? It crossed my mind on more than one occasion. I felt like a dirty, old man, Lily."

Lily laughed softly. "Sev, don't you think on it for a moment. If I can look past your mistakes, do you really think something as trivial as that would matter?"

"I don't know," Severus replied.

"Well, don't dwell on it... any of it if you can help it."

"Easier said than done, Lily," Severus stated sourly.

"I know, Sev, but you have to promise to try... just as you promised to try and forgive yourself. I hate seeing you be so hard on yourself."

"You're too kind to me. You always were."

"I didn't seem very forgiving or kind in that memory by the portrait hole to Gryffindor Tower," Lily uttered sadly. "How could I have turned my back on you when you probably needed me the most, Sev?"

"Don't you dare blame yourself, Lily!" Severus demanded, his eyebrows arched in distress. "By that point, you had every right to refuse my pathetic apologies. I called you a... you-know-what. You know what I was doing for years, who I was friends with. You begged me again and again to stop hanging around with those people, but did I listen? No. That day was my worst memory, and had I known I was going to lose you forever-" Severus choked on a sob.

"But you didn't lose me forever, Severus," Lily said gently, kissing him on the nose. She held his face in her hands, her fingers trailing into his hair at the temples and her thumbs wiping away a couple of errant tears. Gazing deeply into his eyes, she said, "You are a great man, Severus Snape. You must have really impressed God himself if he was willing to give you a second chance. That's exactly what happened. That's a miracle. You're living proof that people can change for the better, and you've already given hope to so many people. Do you remember how the students in the duelling club felt about you leaving? You worked hard to give Slytherin an honorable name again. Before this war is over, I know you'll do so much more."

"You're too-"

"Don't say I'm too kind, Severus," Lily said firmly. "I'm honest. I'm not just telling you these things to make you feel better. I mean them. You know I would not lie to you."

"All right," Severus gave in. "I'm sorry, Lily. I don't doubt your honesty, and from now on, I hope you will be able to trust me, even though I've hidden so much from you for so long."

Lily nodded. "Can you use your knowledge of the future to prevent bad things from happening?"

"I can try... but things have already been altered. There's no guarantee, but I will try."

"We'll face those things together, Sev, as husband and wife."

Severus smiled weakly. "You have no idea how much I love you, Lily."

"I think I do," Lily stated seriously.

Lily cuddled closer to Severus, and he wrapped an arm around her, knowing he would protect her, no matter what the future might bring. Amazed anew at Lily's resilience, Severus silently thanked God for the first time ever for being alive.

Author's Note: There you have it: another nice, long chapter (technically even longer in my own words than the last one) and a quick update, a resolution to the evil cliffie I left you with! These past two chapters have been some of the most fun to write, so they just flowed naturally... hence the quick updates and length.

I just want to take this moment to say how thankful I am for all of you. I am just standing in awe, amazed at how this story has been received. Never in a million years did I expect it to be this popular or liked. You all amaze me. Thank you deeply.

Beautiful new artwork by LilyHBP (from chapter 72) can be found here: <http://lilyhbp.deviantart.com/art/Almost-Twilight-83610642> (remove spaces) Thanks, Lily!!

Check out my profile page to find links to the Russian and French translations of this story (and an Italian one forthcoming). A big thank you to all who have graciously worked hard on translating this fic for others to enjoy!

Chapter Eight-Two

Severus was almost inclined to say he couldn't believe his luck, but he knew it was far more than mere luck that kept Lily by his side. A long history of shared understanding, of endless compassion, and deep love graced their relationship. Severus couldn't believe he would be marrying her in a matter of a few days. She knew the whole truth, and she had remained steadfast. Nothing else really mattered.

The time left before the wedding passed in a whirl. The only unpleasantness he had to endure were suspicious looks from Petunia when he went to Lily's house. Although Lily hadn't told her sister why she had been so upset that day, Petunia was still wary of the marriage. At Lily's assurance and insistence that everything was well between Severus and herself, Petunia reluctantly stopped trying to pry and resigned herself to the fact that Severus would soon be her brother-in-law. Petunia had, thankfully, kept her mouth shut and not told Lily's parents about the day Lily had returned home with the telltale signs of tears in her eyes. Maybe Petunia had finally realized when she needed to step back and let Lily live her life.

Severus wasn't too caught up in the last minute wedding plans. Lily's backyard had been decorated the day before, and the weather was promising to be a gorgeous day. Arrangements with the pastor from the local church were completed, and all the guests had replied to their invitations. Lily's dress was perfect... or as perfect as she felt it needed to be, although Petunia still found little details to worry about.

August 12 soon dawned. Severus had barely slept the night before. Examining himself in the mirror that morning, he realized he looked a fright. The black circles around his eyes needed to go, and his hair was standing up on end. He stepped into the shower, scrubbing every square inch of his body, wanting to be impeccably clean. He toweled off and ran a comb through his hair, flattening it against his scalp, finishing off with a Drying Charm. The dark circles had faded, but he realized he needed to shave. Once that was done, he checked himself over, satisfied enough. Unfortunately, his hair was at an awkward phase in growing out and appeared shaggy.

There was no point in dressing yet, as the ceremony was still a couple of hours away. Pulling on a clean robe, Severus went downstairs, knowing he would need to force himself to consume something of substance.

Upon reaching the bottom of the steps, Severus gazed around at the surroundings. He hadn't had much time to do anything aesthetically with his house, what with working and training at St. Mungo's. Once married, he was sure the house would be receiving a facelift.

Deciding not to give the old, dingy house another thought for now, Severus headed into the kitchen and set to preparing a pot of coffee. His father was due at any moment, but he wondered if the man would prove to be the grounding support he needed right now.

Setting two places at the table, Severus prepared a quick breakfast and had just finished pouring the coffee when a knock issued forth from the door. Knowing it had to be Tobias, Severus set the coffee pot back on the stove and went to the front door to receive his father.

Sure enough, Tobias was there. He was holding a hanger with his own tuxedo, which was covered in plastic to keep it clean.

"Hello, Severus!" Tobias greeted him enthusiastically. Stepping inside, he hung the tuxedo on the coatrack. "Today's the big day, my son!"

Grimacing at his father's theatrics, Severus groaned. "Yes, I realize that, Father. And hello to you, too. Breakfast is ready." He motioned toward the kitchen.

Tobias amiably followed his son and took the seat across from him.

"Are you happy?" he asked.

"Of course," Severus replied, a little surprised Tobias would even ask such a question.

"You don't look it," Tobias said seriously.

"I'm just... nervous," Severus stated, thinking back to a few days ago. Although he was relieved beyond belief that Lily hadn't pushed him

away, now that the "big day" was here, his nerves were on fire. "I've never done this before."

"Understandable," Tobias replied, his mouth relaxing into a smile. "There's really nothing to be nervous about, though. This is a happy day, Severus."

And I suppose you can tell me all about what constitutes a good marriage, Severus thought bitterly, but didn't say so aloud.

What is the matter with you? an opposing voice demanded in his head. *If you're truly happy, you shouldn't be holding onto the past, whether in regards to your father or your own life... lives.*

Severus knew the second voice was right. Old habits died hard; that was a fact. He was constantly having to remind himself that he had many reasons to be happy.

Severus had spent too many years being everything but happy to simply embrace happiness when it came, though.

He sighed and forced a smile.

"Indeed it is, Father. Let's eat, shall we? I know it would do me some good."

Glad to see his son more at ease, Tobias dug in to the food with more relish than Severus did. After breakfast, they headed upstairs to dress. Tobias took his old bedroom, and Severus went to his own.

Severus opened the wardrobe and extracted the tuxedo he would be wearing. He had altered it magically to fit him properly. The black jacket and trousers were wrinkle-free and crisp. Within five minutes, Severus was fully dressed and standing in front of the full-length mirror in his bedroom. The tuxedo suited him well. A white vest peeked out just above the jacket, and a small white bowtie finished the look. Severus thought it rather stuffy and knew he would be hot in the summer sun, figuring he would remove the outer layers promptly after the ceremony.

Satisfied with his appearance, Severus left his bedroom and made to head back downstairs, but he ran into Tobias in the hallway. Father and son stood facing each other for a moment, and then Tobias clasped Severus on the shoulder appraisingly with a hand.

"You have made me proud, Severus. Just look at you - getting married. I am... you have no idea how much I regret that I couldn't be the father you needed all these years," Tobias finished softly, his voice tinged with sorrow.

Severus felt his nerves fall away. All he had been focusing on was himself all day, and now, hearing his father's words, he was moved beyond his troubles and anxieties.

"Dad, you- I know," Severus sighed, understanding very well what it meant to have regrets about one's past. "But what good can come from dwelling on what's already come to pass? As you told me, this is a happy day. When I asked you to be my best man, it was with hope for the future. I am not usually an optimistic person, but Lily's influence on me has been great where that is concerned."

"She is a wonderful young woman," Tobias conceded.

Severus smiled. "Yes, yes, she is." Feeling better than he had all day, Severus was reminded once again of how elated he had felt upon asking Lily to marry him. Not only had she said yes to the person she thought she knew, but she had stood by his side, knowing who he really was. "She's so brave."

"As are you, Severus."

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On Webber Street, Lily was sitting at her vanity as Petunia fussed with her hair.

"You know, it would help if you had more than three inches of hair to work with, Lily," Petunia grumbled. "I could put it in a lovely updo."

"You can manage, I'm sure," Lily quipped, amused at her sister's ability to find something to stress about, no matter how trivial.

"Can't you use your wand to make it grow?" Petunia asked, toying with a lock.

"I could, but-"

"But nothing, Lily! This is your wedding. Don't you want to look beautiful?"

"And having shorter hair makes me less beautiful?" Lily asked wryly.

"No, I- Argh! Fine, just sit still. You have magic, and yet you refuse to use it."

"You're the one who insisted on doing my hair, Tuney."

"All right, all right! Just... give me a minute."

Petunia used the curling iron on Lily's hair. As Lily's hair had grown, the natural curls had been lost to waves. Petunia rather liked the curls. She then sprayed an enormous amount of hairspray on Lily's head, causing Lily to choke in disgust on the aerosol fumes.

"There," Petunia said proudly after a while.

"It's perfect, Petunia. Thank you." Lily smiled.

Petunia blushed. "Thank you," she said softly. "Now, let's get you dressed."

Lily's wedding dress hung in her closet, everything altered to fit her just right. Petunia removed the dress, pulling off the plastic covering and held it up, a wistful expression on her face. Lily knew her sister was imagining what she would look like on her own wedding day. For now, Petunia was wearing a pale yellow bridesmaid's dress.

"One day soon, Petunia," Lily said seriously.

"How did you know?" Petunia asked, eyeing her sister with surprise and suspicion.

"The look on your face betrays you," Lily said gently.

"Oh, right... well, let's get you in this dress," Petunia said with determination, not wishing to dwell on possibilities.

Lily slipped off her bathrobe and first put the slip on, which puffed out in several layers around her legs. Petunia then helped Lily slide the dress down over her head and smooth it around her body. She zipped up the back of it, securing it with the little button at the top of the zipper.

"Wow," Petunia breathed. "Lily, look at yourself."

Lily stepped into her shoes and moved in front of the mirror on her vanity, having to take a few steps back to see her whole body. Lily exhaled in amazement upon seeing her reflection. Others had always told her she was beautiful, and she had considered herself pretty enough, but never had she felt like *this*. Petunia had already helped her with her make up before doing her hair, so she was completely ready for the wedding. She had never felt so beautiful in her life as she did in right now.

"Wow," Lily echoed Petunia's word from a moment ago.

"Severus is going to faint when he sees you," Petunia remarked, smiling.

Lily gave her sister a grateful smile in return, glad to know Petunia was happy for her, even if she had expressed her doubts.

Just then, the door to the bedroom opened, and Violet entered. She was dressed elegantly, but not overly so. Her hair was still quite short, but her dress was a darker yellow than Petunia's and came to just below her knees. It mostly resembled a sundress, but fancier.

Violet's mouth dropped open upon seeing her younger daughter. Extending her arms, she came toward Lily and hugged her.

"Look at you, Lily!" she exclaimed, kissing her on the cheek. "You're ever as lovely as I imagined!"

"Thank you, Mum, but Petunia helped tremendously," Lily replied.

Violet in turn hugged Petunia. "You're a wonderful daughter, Petunia. You girls have no idea how proud I am of both of you, and to see you as friends again... I am truly happy."

The sisters exchanged embarrassed looks at their mother's appraisal. Ross joined the women a minute later, remarking on how lovely his daughters were. He gazed at his watch.

"The guests are starting to arrive," he explained. "We should probably start getting in place."

Lily's eyes bulged. "Are they really?" she gaped.

Chuckling, Ross took his daughter's arm and led her out of the room. "Yes, that they are."

"Is- is Severus here?" Lily asked in an unnaturally high voice.

"Not yet, but any moment. His father and he are going to Apparate into our library downstairs, where it's private."

Lily nodded, feeling the butterflies burst to life in her stomach. This was it. The moment was almost here. Violet and Petunia wished Lily their best and went downstairs to find their places, leaving Lily alone with her father.

"Daddy," Lily whispered, searching her father's eyes.

"You haven't called me 'Daddy' in years, Lily," Ross said seriously.

"I know, it's just... This is really happening, isn't it? I'm very happy to be marrying Severus. I love him, Dad, but I'll be on my own now. I'm not your 'little girl' anymore, am I?"

"You have been a young lady for a while now, Lily, but that doesn't change the fact that a part of you will always be my 'little girl.' I'll always remember how you used to climb into my lap when I was watching the evening news on the telly. You would curl up into a little ball, your tiny arms trying to wrap around me, and you'd whisper sweetly into my ear and giggle."

Lily smiled at those memories. How long ago they seemed, indeed. She had been younger then than when she had first met Severus.

"I'll always remember, too, Dad. Now we just have to wait for the music to begin..."

x x x x x

Severus and Tobias exchanged one last look of understanding. The time was upon them. Taking his father's hand, Severus Apparated them directly to the small library in Lily's house. Upon reaching their destination, Severus gazed briefly out the window, seeing that the few rows of chairs were occupied by the guests. The pastor was off to the side, and Petunia and Violet were standing at the back of the crowd. There weren't too many people, perhaps thirty, and many of them Severus didn't know. He didn't have any family besides his father, so they were Lily's extended family. He saw the backs of James, Sirius, Remus, and Mary among the crowd. They hadn't invited any of their professors, as Severus didn't really want Dumbledore there, and he hadn't been particularly close to the others. Lily was fine with that, also wanting to keep the wedding as small as possible. The only adult from the wizarding world who they had invited was Madam Pomfrey, of whom Severus was fond. Somehow, he would have felt guilty not inviting the matron.

"We should get in place," Tobias stated. "Everyone else looks ready."

The annoying lump in Severus's throat wouldn't go away as he nodded. Feeling like he was floating, as this reality didn't seem real enough, Severus eased toward the door and opened it. Tobias motioned for him to go first, so Severus walked through the house and out the back door. He took his place at the front of the gathering, Tobias standing next to him. He felt the eyes of everyone on him, which, combined with his elation and nerves, made Severus uncomfortable. He wondered how it was possible to feel so many emotions at once.

"Relax, Severus," Tobias murmured. "She will step down the aisle in a moment, and everything will be perfect."

The music started. Severus's chest clenched, and his dark eyes locked on the aisle where Lily would be in a minute.

Author's Note: Sorry to leaving you hanging there (well, sort of sorry!), but the next chapter will follow in a couple of days and will pick up right from this point.

I've opened a Cafe Press shop, where you can purchase T-shirts and other merchandise based on this story. It features my original artwork. Check out the link on my profile page or here (remove spaces): [http: /
www . cafepress . com / sindie](http://www.cafepress.com/sindie)

Chapter Eighty-Three

Everything Severus had been waiting for converged into this moment.

Violet walked down the aisle first, taking her seat in the front row of chairs as the bride's mother. Petunia followed shortly thereafter, keeping her eyes focused on the minister, and she appeared a little nervous. When she reached the front, she glanced briefly at Severus, raising an eyebrow, but giving him a small smile. The gesture spoke of her acceptance of his marrying her sister, but also that she would be watching out for Lily.

Severus would have given her a nod under most circumstances, but he couldn't move. Tobias murmured some reassuring words that sounded like nonsense, but all Severus could do was keep his eyes averted from all else. He had eyes only for Lily.

People stood. Then she was there... walking down the short aisle. Severus thought his insides might drop out of him, because surely his soul was flying and couldn't be contained by his mortal coil. Such ecstasy had never been felt. What pure exhilaration, what rapturous delight beyond any words and thought! Severus knew he must have been smiling widely. Lily was an angel, so tranquil, so sweet, so lovely... his angel.

Lily was beaming back at him. He looked ever bit as happy as she imagined, and in his tuxedo, Severus was handsome and divine to her. She had always loved his smile, but more than any physical attraction, Lily was moved, pulled toward him, both literally and spiritually, and now she found herself standing next to him. Her father's kind hold on her arm was barely felt.

Severus and Lily kept their eyes locked on each other as the music stopped and the minister began to speak.

"Severus Snape and Lily Evans, by being present here today to be joined together as one in marriage, you are taking part in an act of faith, to be wedded in holy matrimony. This faith of which I speak has been growing and grows and will continue to grow long on into the future if you both ever strive to believe and embrace it and make it a reality.

"If the foundation of your marriage is the love and devotion you feel, you have, you exchange between each other, and it is to last forever, then you may rest in the hope of a beautiful future together. Do not allow such precious love to wither and fade with the passing years, for life has a way of challenging and trying to take from us that which we hold most dear.

"The dedication you feel for one another in this moment will continue to grow and mature with the passage of time, in ways you cannot yet grasp. Only when you remain steadfast in your devotion toward each other, through the good times and the bad, will you conquer the evils of the world that will threaten love such as yours. Have faith not only in one another, but in God, who has blessed this union.

"Now, I ask, who presents this woman to be wedded to this man?"

Ross replied, "Lily's mother and I do."

He leaned forward and kissed Lily on the cheek, giving both of her hands a gentle squeeze and retreating to sit next to his wife. Lily gave her father a smile and mouthed, "I love you."

"Please take each other's hands," the minister kindly instructed the young couple.

Severus and Lily, trembling, took each other's hands and faced one another.

"As you have written your own vows," the minister said, "you, Severus, may give yours to Lily."

Swallowing down the lump in his throat, Severus began, "I, Severus, take you, Lily, as my best friend and the love of my life, who has been by my side for many years, in both good times and bad, asking you to just be yourself always, loving all I know of you, yet trusting what I may not know right now, throughout life and all that may come."

Severus then took the ring and slid it slowly onto her delicate finger, continuing, "I bestow this ring upon you as a token and symbol of my vow and pledge to you, on this day and always, and with all I have and who I am, I love you and honor you, with God as my witness."

"Now, Lily, is it your turn," the minister announced.

Lily's eyes were misty with happy tears as she repeated what Severus had promised her a moment ago. "I, Lily, take you, Severus, as my best friend and the love of my life, who has been by my side for many years, in both good times and bad, asking you to just be yourself always, loving all I know of you, yet trusting what I may not know right now, throughout life and all that may come."

Lily placed the ring on Severus's long, thin finger, saying, "I bestow this ring upon you as a token and symbol of my vow and pledge to you, on this day and always, and with all I have and who I am, I love you and honor you, with God as my witness."

Their vows exchanged, the minister concluded, "In the presence of God and these witnesses, having heard what these two young people have professed in love and trust, I now pronounce you, Severus and Lily, as husband and wife. You may kiss the bride!"

Unable to contain his joy, Severus threw all restrictive feelings to the wind and took Lily in his arms, kissing her deeply. Applause erupted around them, and the music began again. People stood as the newlyweds walked down the short aisle, and smiles spread on faces everywhere. Severus thought he had to be in heaven, for never in his life had he been this full of happiness and seen that people were happy for him. Lily was holding his hand tightly the whole time.

"We're finally married, Sev!" she exclaimed, kissing him once more.

"I know," he chuckled. Then more softly, he whispered sweetly, "I know. And it is wonderful."

As was tradition, the guests formed a line to receive the couple. Lily's parents were the first to approach them, hugging them affectionately and expressing their congratulations and well wishes. Tobias was next and then Petunia. After hugging Lily, Petunia was face-to-face with Severus. A brief awkwardness fell over them, but Severus extended his hand to her. She took his, shaking it firmly, but they didn't embrace. Petunia gave him a single nod and a tight-lipped smile, which Severus returned.

Several members of Lily's family passed through the line, and Lily had to introduce Severus to them. He knew he wouldn't remember the names and faces tomorrow, even though there were about twenty people in all, not a huge number. Had this been a magical wedding, all these Muggles would have been shocked to see floating goblets of wine and trays of food which served themselves, but Severus was fine with pretending to be a Muggle for a day.

Bringing up the rear were Mary and the Marauders. Mary hugged Lily tightly, saying, "You look so beautiful, Lily! Is it fair to express my jealousy that I'm not the one getting married?"

Here, Mary eyed James, and he gazed back, caught off guard. Scratching at the back of his head nervously, James replied, "All in good time, Mary. I promise." He offered her what was supposed to be a dashing smile.

Lily and Mary both laughed, and Severus tried not to roll his eyes at the display in front of him. Smirking smugly, he drawled, "And I suppose you thought you would be the first one married out of Hogwarts, Potter?"

Lily stopped giggling upon hearing Severus's remark, and an odd expression passed on her face. She *had* supposedly married James in Severus's first life, and now, looking at James, she was made uncomfortable. While Mary moved on to quickly shaking Severus's hand, James was now standing in front of Lily, not sure what to make of her expression.

"Congratulations, Lily," he said. He then leaned in and did something that Lily wasn't prepared for. He hugged her!

"Th- thanks, James." Lily clumsily patted him on the back and was relieved when he released her.

Beside Lily, Severus became aware of Lily's discomfort and immediately regretted his comment. Now wasn't the time to discuss it, though. James and Lily was done, and James extended his hand toward Severus. As Severus made to shake hands with the man who had been his nemesis for so many years, he half-expected him to pull

his hand away and laugh cruelly, but James kept his hand out, and Severus clasped it.

"Treat her well, Snape," James said in earnest.

"I intend to," Severus stated curtly, as if he would do anything else!

Following James was Sirius, who was just as quick to shake hands with Severus as he had been after the Triwizard Tournament. Severus pulled away, glad for the contact to be over. Thankfully, Sirius didn't say anything and instead was off to the side joking with James and Mary. Finally, Remus was upon them.

Lily hugged him for several seconds.

"I'm happy for you, Lily," Remus was saying. "You always deserved the best."

"Thank you, Remus," Lily replied, touched.

The best? Severus thought in shock. *Lupin thinks our union is "the best?"*

Finished with Lily, Remus shook Severus's hand firmly.

"You may not believe me, Severus, but I am happy for you, too. You and Lily were friends for years, and it only seems right that you are marrying her."

"Thank you, Lupin," Severus murmured, not sure how to express his gratitude toward such unexpected sincerity.

Last to wish them well was Madam Pomfrey. Taking Lily and Severus each by the hand, she gently squeezed their palms, gushing, "Lily, Severus... thank you for having me here, and may your marriage be everything it's meant to be. I'm so happy to see you happy."

"Thanks, Madam Pomfrey," Lily said. "Severus always said you were a positive influence in his life, and we wanted you to be here."

Blushing, Severus admitted, "It's true, Madam Pomfrey. I... I know I haven't gotten to speak much with you in the past year, but those times in the infirmary when I was younger, you were always kind to me. I'll never forget that."

Waving their words off, Madam Pomfrey said, "You have grown into fine, young people, both of you. My best to you."

Once they were done receiving all the guests, Violet approached them, asking them to take their seats, as dinner was about to begin. Lily led Severus to the table at the front, where they were surrounded by their immediate families. Seeing the smiling faces, Severus wished his mother could have been there, but kept those feelings to himself.

Each of Lily's parents and Tobias gave a toast to the newlyweds, but Petunia remained quiet. Severus noticed she kept looking over at the table where Sirius was seated, and whenever Sirius would notice her and give her a smile or wiggle his eyebrows, Petunia would turn away, blushing. The minister followed with a prayer of blessing, and then they went up by table to the buffet line.

The food was nothing extravagant, but Severus had insisted on paying for it rather than letting Violet cook for thirty or so people, which she would have done. The meal was filled with pleasant chatter. Once dinner was finished, the tables broke up, and people stood and moved about, continuing to talk.

An elderly woman who Lily said was her great aunt Lydia took a seat next to Severus when Lily had vacated her chair to go mingle with her cousins. With no one else at the table, Severus was left to the old lady's scrutiny.

"You say you've known my Lily for nine years?" Aunt Lydia questioned.

"That's correct," replied Severus, wondering where this was going.

"You seem awfully young to be getting married. In my day, it was expected that a young lady would be married right away, but times have changed. I trust you have means to take care of her?"

Feeling like he was being interrogated, Severus said stiffly, "Of course."

"Hmmm, well, Petunia informed me of your location of residence. It's not exactly the type of place I would expect Lily to reside. What are your plans, young man?"

Pressing his lips together in annoyance, Severus said, "I assume you're referring to my profession? That would be a doctor, madam." Telling her he would be a Healer might have been amusing, but he had to keep his magical side quiet.

"A doctor?" The old lady's eyes grew large behind her glasses. "Well, that is a most respectable career choice, Severin."

"Severus," he corrected her.

"Right," she said. "Rather an unusual name, isn't it?"

Wondering how much longer and how many more things she could find to disapprove about him, Severus said between clenched teeth, "Perhaps, but it's my name all the same."

Just then, Lily joined them. "Ah, Sev, I see you've met my dear aunt Lydia. Auntie Lydia, I hope you haven't been giving Severus the third degree," she joked lightly.

"Certainly not!" Aunt Lydia exclaimed, affronted.

"Sev," Lily said, ignoring her aunt, "it's time for our first dance."

Severus hadn't expected there to be dance music, as they were outside on the grass. This, he realized, was something Lily and he hadn't really discussed about the wedding. He had been more focused on the actual ceremony, not all the celebrating that followed, some of which Severus felt frivolous. If he hadn't been with Lily, he would have gladly hidden away from mingling.

"Oh," Severus said, surprised. "Then I'll try not to step on your toes too much."

Giggling, Lily took him by the hand. "Nonsense. You're graceful naturally, so I would expect you to be just as graceful on the dance floor."

"What dance floor? And what if I told you I don't dance, Lily? As long as you've known me, have I ever danced with you?"

"No, but there's always a first. This really will be our first dance, then. As for the 'dance floor,' it's just a saying. The open space among the tables is perfect."

Lily winked at her father as she passed him, and Ross set the needle onto the record on the player they had set up outside.

"Just hold me close like you would if you were hugging me," Lily whispered into his ear. "Close your eyes and pretend no one else is around."

"Okay," Severus replied, unsure of himself, pulling Lily to him and wrapping his arms around her. The last thing he saw before closing his eyes was Sirius and Petunia together. His stomach flipfopped, and he wished he had removed his jacket sooner. After this dance, the damn thing would be coming off.

The music started. Severus recognized the old song... "Unchained Melody."

He could feel Lily's body meshed with his own. She smelled of flowers, and she was soft and gentle. They swayed to the melody, and as Lily said, the rest of the people around them melted away. He opened his eyes and gazed into hers. He could be lost forever in that green gaze and not care.

Just as the music wound down, a series of pops reverberated around them, followed quickly by screams. Rudely broken out of his dreamlike state, Severus turned to see what was going on. Several masked figures in black robes were surrounding the wedding guests, and only James, Sirius, Remus, and Mary were standing there with their wands out. Everyone else, save Madam Pomfrey, was a Muggle.

Shit, Severus thought, his insides like ice.

His eyes quickly assessed the situation. There were six Death Eaters in all, and Lord Voldemort was absent. Wishing they had actually invited Dumbledore now, Severus turned to Madam Pomfrey, shouting, "Go! Alert him!"

How he wished he could have been less obvious, but what choice did he have? With a rapid nod, Madam Pomfrey Disappeared.

The Marauders and Mary were much closer to the Muggle guests than Lily or he were, so Severus next turned toward them, shouting, "Take them and get out of here!" He didn't have a moment to think or the time to waste explaining further instructions. He trusted the Marauders to think on their toes.

Understanding immediately, James nodded and said something to Sirius, Remus, and Mary. Although afraid, Lily's relatives complied with taking the hands of these strange people with sticks of wood. Each wizard could only manage to take two people at most, so that left many Muggles still at the mercy of their attackers.

"Leave them alone!" Severus yelled at the advancing Death Eaters. "Your fight is with me!"

Lily wanted to rip her dress off. Fighting in a wedding dress wouldn't do, so she flicked her wand at the bottom, transforming it into a short, regular skirt.

"What a happy occasion," one of the Death Eaters drawled.

Severus recognized that voice instantly.

"Lucius," he breathed.

"How thoughtful of you to remember, Severus," Lucius said. "But apparently not thoughtful enough to remember to invite your old friends."

"Hello, Snape," Mulciber's menacing voice sneered.

"Sev," Lily hissed into his ear. "What do we do?"

Mulciber grapped the nearest person to him, one of Lily's cousins, a girl with blonde hair who couldn't have been older than ten. The little girl screamed, trying to pull away from Mulciber, but the Death Eater held her to him, his hand roughly around her, his wand aimed at her throat. The girl's parents were looking desperately toward her, too afraid to speak.

"Leave her alone!" Lily demanded. "She's done nothing to you!"

"Shut up, Mudblood! She's a filthy Muggle. It's the fact her kind exists that they need to be dealt with!"

"Now, now, Michael," Lucius said calmly. "There is no need to resort to such language."

Severus knew Lucius was simply taunting. The man tried to act with finesse, but he hated Muggles just as much as Mulciber. A series of pops came again, and James and his friends had returned. Just as they made to take more Muggles to safety, though, the Death Eaters all aimed their wands at them.

"I don't think you'll be going anywhere, Potter," Lucius said more maliciously.

"Oh?" James asked. "Try me, Malfoy."

Severus wanted to curse James for being so pompous. Did he think this a joke, a game? He wished the Order would show up, but knowing he couldn't keep standing there, Severus took the distraction of the Marauders' arrival to aim his wand at Mulciber. With a harsh flick, his nonverbal *Sectumsempra* sliced the man's throat, leaving blood gushing. Mulciber tried to scream, but gurgles only came instead. With his hands groping at his neck, his grip on the little girl was released, and she ran to her parents.

"You bastard!" Avery cursed Severus. He made to hit Severus with something, but then Avery turned his attention to Lily. With horror, Severus tried to block whatever vile curse the Death Eater had aimed at his wife, but Lily could stand her ground well. She parried the curse, and a jet a red light issued forth from her wand, a Stunner.

Unfortunately, Avery was more advanced in duelling than he had been a year ago, and he blocked Lily's spell.

"Ah, so I see you want to play dirty," Lucius said harshly, no longer keeping his composure collected. "Very well. Death Eaters, attack!"

The five remaining Death Eaters, what with Mulciber on the ground in agony, targeted the defenseless Muggles, but Severus and Lily dashed into the fray, joined by James, Sirius, Remus, and Mary. Lily's relatives began to flee, but couldn't get too far without taking hits. Thankfully none of the spells had been the Killing Curse, but a couple of people were writhing on the ground, twitching under the Cruciatus Curse.

Severus wasn't going to play games. Stunners and Disarming were jokes. He intended to take down as many Death Eaters as possible with his most useful spell, his own invention. He aimed for Lucius, but the older man was an effective dueller.

In the midst of jets of light, a group of five people arrived. For a fleeting moment, Severus thought more Death Eaters were coming, but relief flooded over him when he saw Dumbledore amongst them. The Order of the Phoenix was here.

While trying to stave off the Death Eaters, Severus had lost sight of his father. Now, he frantically gazed around, as Lily did likewise. Petunia was running with Violet toward the house, but there was no sign of their fathers.

The Death Eaters, upon seeing Dumbledore, drew back momentarily in fright. Such a formidable wizard was not easily reckoned with. Before Dumbledore or any of the Order could attack, though, a bang went off, and with shock, Severus turned his head to see Ross and Tobias running *toward* the Death Eaters, brandishing guns. Seeing the satisfied look on Tobias's face, Severus knew his father had shot his gun off.

"Father!" Severus yelled, but Tobias kept advancing.

"Think you're so clever, do you, with your fancy magic?!" Tobias bellowed at the Death Eaters.

"Father, stop!" Severus demanded, his voice tremulous, for Tobias was writing his death sentence.

Dumbledore, Moody, Frank Longbottom, Edgar Bones, and another whose name escaped Severus took the distraction of the Muggles with guns to attack. The Death Eaters were obviously at a disadvantage. They were outnumbered and were of the younger lot.

A full on battle pursued, and Severus fought with all he had, but now that the Order were here, the battle was shortlived. One by one, the Death Eaters Disapparated, retreating like the cowards they were. Such chaos for ten minutes had left Severus and Lily confused, yet worried.

Only Mulciber remained, and Severus approached him, the man rasping, glaring up at Severus.

"Think you're... so brilliant... do you, Snape?" he said in between shallow breaths. "I... killed your old mate... Pettigrew... He thought he was... brave, too... defying me. He didn't last... more than a minute. You'll be... meeting the same fate soon."

A horrible choking noise issued forth from Mulciber's mouth, and he stopped breathing, his eyes staring lifelessly at the sky. Stunned, Severus stepped back, realizing he had just killed a man.

He couldn't fathom the events that had just taken place. Staring around at scared Muggles, who were being escorted away to safety by the Order, Severus tried to find Lily. Tobias was no worse for the wear as he ambled over to Severus.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Y- yes," Severus croaked. "Are you?"

"Fine as the day had been," Tobias stated.

"Have you seen Lily?"

"Saw her just a minute ago... going that way." Tobias pointed toward the house, where the corner was surrounded by an overgrown bush.

Severus could feel his heart beating in his ears. Oblivious to the conversations around him, he continued on. Violet and Petunia were now coming out of the back door, looking for Lily... and Ross, apparently. Severus hadn't seen the man around since he had gone running into battle.

Hearing sobs, Severus's chest clenched. He stopped, seeing a pair of unmoving feet peeking out from the corner. Fearing the worst, Severus forced himself to step around the bush.

There knelt Lily, tears streaming down her face as she looked down upon her father's lifeless body.

Author's Note: Yes, I'm evil. Did you really think the wedding would go off without a tragedy?

Chapter Eighty-Four

Severus joined Lily, the whole scene in front of him surreal. Was it really possible? Could Ross truly be dead?

"Lily," he said softly, trying to reach out for her, but Lily just shook her head, pulling away, refusing to be comforted.

Severus's eyes drifted to Ross's body. He didn't know why he was doing it, but he had to know for sure. Taking the older man's hand in his own, Severus found that it was still warm. He felt for a pulse. He thought there wasn't one, that Lily's father was gone, but then he felt it. A slow, weak pulse.

Gasping, Severus dropped the hand in shock and said, "Lily, he's... he's alive."

Unable to believe him, Lily shook her head again. "N- no, he's d-dead."

"How long have you been here?" Severus posed gently.

"Not even... a minute," Lily replied shakily. "I f- found him like this."

Severus aimed his wand at Ross, shouting, "Ennervate!"

The life sprung back into Lily's father. His eyes blinked, and he turned his face toward his daughter.

"Lily?" Ross asked softly. "Why are you crying?"

"Dad? Daddy?" Lily asked tremulously. "Are you really... alive?"

"Lily, darling," Ross said, taking his daughter in his arms, and Lily cried into his shoulder in relief.

"I just assumed the worst," she confessed. "So stupid of me, but when I saw you just lying there like that, I thought for sure they'd killed you. They hate Muggles. Why would they have let you live?"

"I'm fine, honey," Ross reassured her. "I was just knocked out."

Severus couldn't believe their luck. Relief poured over him as he watched the scene before him, but still too shaken from the battle, Severus glanced back at the yard, seeing Mulciber's body. He hated the bastard, and as much as he felt Mulciber deserved nothing short of death, he hadn't meant to kill him.

Still, Severus wondered why Ross hadn't been killed. Whatever the reason, whether chance, luck, or something else, Severus didn't know as he turned back toward Lily and Ross.

"We'd better go back to where the Order is," Severus suggested. "I think Violet and Petunia were looking for you two as well."

Lily helped her father stand, and they began returning to the main part of the yard. Having calmed, Lily stated, "At least no one got killed."

"Actually," Severus said softly, and he motioned toward Mulciber's body.

Lily's eyes fell upon their old classmate and gasped. "You mean? I thought you just attacked him, Sev. Did- did your curse kill him?"

Severus nodded. Would Lily think him a monster for killing, even though she knew of his past? Did she think he was beyond such a thing now, even though he only intended to do it in extreme circumstances? He supposed this attack constituted such a time, but still, that didn't make the guilt disappear.

"It did," Severus admitted. "I only meant to free your cousin from him, or else he would have killed her-"

"You did it out of defense, Sev," Lily said gently. "He was a Death Eater, too..."

They reached the group assembled there. When Violet saw her husband, she ran to him and threw her arms around him.

"I had hoped if I had been at your wedding, it would have been a happy occasion," Dumbledore said to Severus, "not such an attack."

Severus wondered if the headmaster was accusing him of not inviting him to their wedding, which, although true, wasn't something he was going to discuss right now.

"I killed him," Severus stated, staring at Mulciber.

"Severus," Dumbledore sighed. "Was that your intention?"

"No, but I knew there was a risk. I acted without thinking, but I didn't have time to think. They were attacking Lily's relatives, who are all Muggles."

"There is no need to explain, Severus," Dumbledore reassured him. "You did the right thing by having Poppy alert me. Thankfully we were able to arrive before things got too out of hand. Do you think the attack was personal, seeing as the Death Eaters present were your peers?"

"That is likely," Severus said. "You-Know-Who could've targeted the wedding as well, though. The question is, how did they know?"

Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully, watching as Frank and Edgar, both Aurors, examined Mulciber's body. One of them was rolling back the man's sleeve, seeing evidence that he was marked as a follower of Voldemort.

"Don't you worry on it, Severus!" Frank called over. "I've already talked with the others who were present, and they said you were saving a little girl's life."

"And Crouch, one of the top Aurors, has felt it legitimate to use any means to bring down a Death Eater, including the Killing Curse, but you didn't use an Unforgivable," Edgar explained. "You shouldn't even have to worry about a trial."

Severus hadn't even thought about the repercussions for his actions. Somehow, even though he wasn't going to face a sentence in Azkaban, combined with the fact that he had unintentionally killed a Death Eater, Severus couldn't feel right with himself for killing a man. He looked at Dumbledore and swallowed. Dumbledore stared back at him curiously with those piercing blue eyes of his, but Severus

averted his gaze. He had no energy to erect the necessary mental barriers, and he didn't think Dumbledore needed to see himself being blasted off the Astronomy Tower by Severus's Killing Curse.

"What a mess," Moody growled. "We're going to have a lot of explaining to do to the Ministry, and all those Muggles' minds will have to be wiped." He kicked at Mulciber's leg. "Death Eater filth," he mumbled.

"Alastor, Edgar, Frank, I trust you can take Michael Mulciber's body to the necessary authorities?" Dumbledore asked.

"Yes," Moody replied curtly. "Come on, boys," he instructed the young Aurors. "Let's get this sorry bastard out of these nice people's backyard."

The three of them surrounded the body and Disapparated, taking it away.

"Is everyone here all right?" Dumbledore asked Lily's family and Tobias.

They nodded, expressing their thanks, and Dumbledore gave them a brief smile and said to the only woman who had come with them, "Let's be off, Marlene." Turning one last time to the younger wizards and witches, Dumbledore added, "You have all done well. Mary, I would like you to consider joining the Order, too."

Mary was a bit stunned, but James patted her on the shoulder, seemingly glad to have his girlfriend with him in the Order. Dumbledore and Marlene McKinnon were gone a moment later.

"Wow," Sirius breathed, "that was mental. I wonder if my idiot brother was among them," he said darkly.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Severus stated, wondering if Regulus had, indeed, been present.

He surmised Rosier and Wilkes had been there, and that left one more Death Eater. Regulus was a likely choice.

"I'm sorry your wedding was ruined," Mary said sincerely.

"What I don't understand," James cut in, "is how they knew... and how they were able to get past the protective barriers."

"You do have protection, right?" Remus asked, looking at Lily.

"I thought we did," Lily said. "Those are all good questions, but I think the party is over... Thanks for coming."

Knowing this was goodbye, the Marauders and Mary exchanged their farewells. Severus stood with his father, grateful his father and Lily's family were still alive. He didn't know what he would have done if Ross had actually been dead. Their anniversaries would have been forever tainted as the day Lily's father died.

Once James, Sirius, Remus, and Mary were gone, that left only their immediate families. Petunia hadn't spoken the whole time and appeared shaken. She walked into the house without a word, leaving Lily and Violet watching her retreating form with concern and sadness.

"I don't think Petunia expected it could be this bad," Lily confessed. "Then again, I didn't, either. I have a very bad feeling this is only the beginning of the war."

"The important thing is that we're all okay," Ross reassured.

"But what about next time?" Lily demanded. "How can you go on living your lives if they're at risk like that? Dad, Mum... I can't lose you."

"But neither can we live in fear, darling," Violet said gently.

"She's right," Tobias said gruffly. "I don't know about you, Ross, but I'm keeping a gun on me at all times now. They might have magic, but we aren't completely defenseless."

"That's an idea with merit," Ross agreed.

Silence fell among them, but then Violet spoke.

"I'm sorry your wedding was ruined," she said, looking directly at Severus and Lily.

"It's not your fault," Severus murmured.

"No, but I still find it an awful shame that what was supposed to be a happy occasion turned out badly."

"It was going splendidly until the attack," Lily pointed out.

"Well, there's not much use in dwelling on what's already happened," Ross said heavily. "We'd best get this yard cleaned up."

The next few hours were dull. Severus kept wondering what was going on at the Ministry while he was in the midst of picking up rubbish and folding tableclothes. To be left merely cleaning up after a party when they had been engaged in a full on battle hours ago was strange. Real life didn't seem like it had the right to pick up again.

Having to live in near constant fear and walking a thin line in his previous experience, Severus supposed he didn't know what a normal life was really like. When they said their goodbyes to Violet, Ross, and Tobias later, Severus and Lily left her childhood home in a somber attitude.

The sun was setting, leaving the inside of Spinner's End darker than usual. Severus thought the house an appropriate dwelling place after such a day.

"Petunia isn't talking to me again," Lily said sadly.

Severus threw his dirty jacket over the arm of the couch and sat down. He had removed the bowtie and undone the top couple of buttons hours ago when cleaning. His white shirt was stained, and his hair felt a mess. Lily joined him, still wearing the oddly transfigured short skirt with the fancy bodice of the dress.

"I'm sorry," Severus muttered, thinking Petunia the least of their worries.

"Was it like this the first time?" Lily posed in a small voice. "Did my... Did my parents survive?"

"I don't know what happened to your parents, Lily. We weren't talking anymore at that point, but they weren't alive when... when you were murdered. Your son was raised by your sister."

Lily didn't have the energy to cry. Completely drained, her head dropped onto his shoulder, so Severus wrapped an arm around her.

"Today wasn't all bad," he said quietly. "I know it's hard to see past that attack, but the ceremony and the beginning of the party went very well, even perfectly. No one we love died. And I have you. You have me. We're married, Lily. Despite all the bad, there is that good truth."

Lily looked up at him and smiled a little. "Yes, we're married." She kissed him.

"This gloomy place is our home," Severus said wryly.

"I say we go upstairs to *our* bedroom and make some good memories to add to the collection," Lily stated, finding her courage and confidence.

"I won't argue with that." Severus smiled and picked Lily up, taking her up the stairs to their room.

Author's Note: Now, that's dedication. I couldn't leave you hanging after that last chapter. I hope you don't consider me so evil now.

Chapter Eighty-Five

If Severus had any dreams of married life being blissful, he would have found them shattered the first morning of their union together. All during breakfast, Lily kept glancing toward the door and out the window, her expression anxious and worried.

"What's the matter?" Severus finally asked, a bit put out by her attitude.

"It's just... Petunia," Lily sighed. "You saw the way she walked back into the house yesterday without saying a word. What if she doesn't talk to me again?"

Closing his eyes to keep from retorting, Severus said evenly, "You want to talk with her."

It wasn't a question. As much as Severus wanted to tell Lily that they were their own family now, he knew it would be horribly insensitive. While he hated seeing Lily saddened by her shaky relationship with her sister, he didn't want her spending her days feeling guilty and running off to try to speak with someone who didn't seem to want it as much.

"Well, yes," Lily admitted. "I'd ring, but seeing as you don't... er, we don't have a telephone, that won't do. I was hoping to pop on over after I got ready."

"And do you wish for me to accompany you, my wife?" Severus inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"What's the matter, Severus?" Lily asked archly. "I realize we're married now, but Petunia is still a part of my family... and by extention, yours."

"I didn't say otherwise, did I? Anyway, perhaps I should come along. I think it's high time Petunia and I cleared the air."

Lily was wary of an interaction between her husband and her sister. They had never gotten on well, but lately, they tolerated each other,

which was more than she could say in the whole time they had known one another.

"All right," Lily agreed.

The rest of breakfast passed, and Severus quickly cleaned up the kitchen while Lily went upstairs to shower. Figuring he could catch a shower later, as the one shower used up all the hot water, Severus dressed in Muggle clothes and waited for Lily to finish getting ready.

He waited in the sitting room, staring at the empty grate, lost in thought. Severus sighed, wondering how things would be now that they were married. Lily seemed on edge this morning, and even if she was simply concerned about her sister, he had a feeling it went deeper than that. She had assumed the worst yesterday in thinking her father dead. Severus was sure she was very worried about the safety of her family now.

When Lily came downstairs a few minutes later, she was dressed in a pair of bellbottom jeans and a long-sleeved red shirt. She gave her husband a brief smile.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

"Yes. Did you want to walk or Apparate? It's nice morning for a walk," Severus offered, in hopes it would calm his wife down.

"Can we just Apparate?" Lily posed. "I don't want to waste any more time."

Waste any more time? Severus thought, a bit put out. A walk through the neighborhood certainly hadn't been a waste of time before, but trying to keep things in perspective, Severus gave her a firm nod, standing and taking her hand.

With a crack, they went from their house to Lily's old house, appearing in the foyer.

Hearing the noise, Violet's voice called from the kitchen, "Hello? Is that you, Lily? Severus?"

"Yes, Mum, it's just us," Lily replied, walking toward the kitchen. "No need to worry."

Violet greeted her daughter with a kiss on the cheek. "I wasn't worried," she said, waving Lily's concern off. "I just wasn't expecting you both to be visiting so soon, is all. Is everything all right?"

Severus stepped into the kitchen, and Violet said, "And a good morning to you, Severus. I trust married life is treating you well?"

"It's only been a day," Lily pointed out.

Violet laughed. "Have you had breakfast yet? Lily, Severus, why don't you take a seat? Ross will be down shortly."

"Actually, we already ate," Lily explained. "I was hoping to talk with Petunia."

Violet sighed. "She's upstairs."

Lily murmured her thanks and excused herself. Severus watched her go, wishing she would have turned to him for comfort.

"Oh, don't look so down, Severus, dear," Violet said kindly, setting a plate in front of him, even though he wasn't particularly hungry. "When I first got married, I wanted to run back to my parents at every little sign of difficulty. It's not easy adjusting to a life with someone else, even if that person is the one you love."

Ross entered and joined them, having overheard the last part of Violet's explanation.

"She's right, you know," he remarked. "That's a smart woman I married there." He winked at Violet from across the table.

Severus gave them each a small, thankful smile and picked at the eggs. He wondered how things were going upstairs between the sisters.

A few minutes later, his question was answered. Lily came into the kitchen, tears streaking slowly down her cheeks. She simply shook

her head, wiping the telltale signs of her hurt away. She joined them at the table, placing her elbows on its surface and burying her face in her hands.

"What happened, darling?" Violet asked, placing a comforting hand on her daughter's back.

"She didn't want to hear anything I had to say," Lily replied in a constricted voice, withdrawing her face some from her hands.

"Maybe she just needs a little more time," Ross suggested.

"But why should she be angry in the first place?" Lily demanded, now angry herself. "It's not our fault the wedding was attacked!"

"To Petunia, it is," Severus said softly. "Just the fact that we're magical means she probably sees us as the reason for the attack. Had you been a Muggle, Lily, none of this would have happened."

"Then what do you suggest I do?" Lily asked pointedly. "We can just as soon remove our magic as she can become magical. It's a part of who I am. Why should I change that?"

"No one is saying you need to change, Lily," Violet reasoned.

Before her mum could get another word in, however, Lily interrupted, "Petunia certainly begs to differ."

Agonized by the scene before him, Severus abruptly soon. "I'm going to talk to her."

"Severus, no," Lily said shortly. "That'll just make things-"

"Worse?" he asked. "It's unlikely to be any worse than it already is, Lily. You've tried talking with her on numerous occasions. I'm your husband, and- and... I already said I wanted to try and clear the air."

"Go ahead, Severus," Ross told the younger man, giving him a small smile. "And good luck."

Severus gave them a curt nod, thinking, *I'll need all the luck I can get.*

He exited the kitchen, walking down the short hall to the foyer. He gazed up the stairway, seeing it retreat into the darkness. Sighing, Severus took hold of the railing and began the trek up the steps. He stopped at the door to Lily's old bedroom before heading farther down the hallway. He had rarely been in Petunia's room before, so awkwardness was added to the trepidation he already felt. Finally reaching his destination, he knocked.

"Lily, I already told you to go away," Petunia's irritable voice barked from inside the room.

"I'm not Lily," Severus said.

There was a pause, then Petunia said nastily, "If I don't want to talk to Lily, I certainly have nothing to say to *you*."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Severus said mockingly. "I can think of plenty of things."

Suddenly, the door was flying open and Petunia stood there glaring at Severus. Almost nose-to-nose, Petunia's eyes slits, she hissed, "You dare? You have the audacity to marry my sister, and you think that somehow gives you the right to come banging at my door, demanding an explanation?"

Petunia made to close the door, but Severus shoved a leg between the door and the frame. Petunia glared at him.

"First of all, I didn't bang on your door," Severus said in a deadly calm voice. "Secondly, I think I do have a right to 'demand an explanation,' as you so delicately put it. You know by now that I don't care a whit what you think of me, but your sister's happiness should matter to you. She asked you to be her maid of honor, for heaven's sake. She is trying to build a relationship with you, no matter how fragmented and weak the pieces may be. She cares about you, Petunia, but she cannot help who or what she is. You shouldn't blame her for being a witch."

"But she didn't have to get involved with a wizard like you, one who somehow brings trouble with him. Who were those people who attacked the wedding? Whoever they were, it's obvious they were

only there because of you. You've pissed off others, and now they're after my family. How would you have felt if someone had been killed? And why was my sister coming home in tears a few days before the wedding? Did you hurt her?"

Swallowing his guilt, Severus implored, "Petunia, please... Your sister would have been in danger even if she hadn't been around me. Those people who attacked yesterday are called Death Eaters, and they serve a Dark wizard. You've heard talk about him already. They target people like your sister because she's Muggleborn. They loathe Muggleborns and Muggles alike, but Lily and I are working against people like that. There are things... protections that can be done to help ensure your safety. I thought your home was amply protected, but obviously it wasn't. We can keep your whole family safe."

"You still didn't answer my question about why Lily was crying several days back. What did you say to her?"

This, Severus knew, he couldn't tell her. "Like anyone, Lily and I have our differences of opinion," Severus stated. "We got into a bit of a row, and like an idiot, I said some things that were hurtful and wrong. She and I have worked it out now, but if you don't believe anything else I tell you, believe this: I love Lily very much. I would never do anything to intentionally hurt her."

Petunia didn't seem fully satisfied with this answer, for she wanted a more detailed explanation, but in spite of herself, her interest was piqued regarding the protection of which Severus was speaking.

"What do you mean about protection for my family?" she inquired shrewdly. "If we all have to be confined to this house and not have lives... Dad has work. I am planning on returning to university in the autumn. We can't just-"

"You wouldn't have to live like prisoners," Severus explained hastily. "Petunia, come downstairs and sit with the rest of your family. There's something I ought to further explain to you all."

Still eyeing Severus distrustfully, Petunia left her room, walking past Severus without a word. He followed her in silence back down the stairs.

Upon entering the kitchen, Lily and Severus locked eyes for a moment. Lily's expression of surprise trailed to her sister, and she watched as Petunia stiffly sat down in a chair next to her father.

"Severus would like to enlighten us on some supposed protection he's offered us," Petunia stated in way of explanation, although her tone was skeptical.

Severus stood rigidly by the door for a minute, wishing all eyes weren't on him.

"Relax, Severus," Violet said gently, patting the empty seat next to her.

Severus dropped into the proffered seat. "What Petunia says is true. There may be a way of keeping you all safe from people like those who attacked yesterday."

"May be?" Petunia echoed. "That doesn't sound very convincing."

Feeling his defenses rising, Severus literally bit his tongue to keep from lashing out.

"What do these protections entail?" Ross inquired calmly.

"When wizards are under seventeen, they have something called the Trace on them. It allows the Ministry of Magic to be informed if they use magic or not. I figured if a person can be Traced, then they should be able to be Untraced."

"But they are essentially Untraced when they come of age, Sev," Lily pointed out, wondering where this was going.

"The lack of the Trace being on them is more the proper way of looking at it," Severus proceeded to explain, trying to ignore Lily's dejected look. He wasn't trying to shoot down her opinion or understanding of things, but wishing to get to the important matter here, Severus continued, "As Lily could tell you, I have invented spells of my own. I have a knack for it, a natural ability if you will. Knowing the war would be escalating, I set to trying to develop something I call the Untrace, for lack of a better word. The

Untraceable Charm, I properly call it. Once placed on an individual, they cannot be located, tracked, or their existence even known by magical means or by magical people."

Lily was impressed, as were her parents, and she wondered if Severus had actually developed this charm during his other life as an adult. Such a thing seemed very complicated and would have likely taken years to develop fully. Petunia, however, didn't appear completely convinced.

"Won't it look fishy?" she asked. "They already know Lily has a family. If we suddenly just seem to have disappeared..."

"Your house can be made Unplottable as well. They wouldn't find your home or you," Severus stated.

"But we're magical, Sev," Lily said. "Will we be able to know my family exists, or do I have to say goodbye for now and wonder when... if I'll ever see them again?" she finished in a small, constricted voice.

"We can be the exceptions... along with anyone else we deem trustworthy. In theory, it should work, but I haven't had the opportunity to properly test it on anyone yet. We'll place extra protective wards on your home as well as a back up."

"Well, what do you think?" Violet asked Ross.

"I think it's worth trying," Ross said readily. "If help is available, I'm willing to take it."

Petunia bit her lip, her eyes jetting from Lily to Severus and back again. Finally, she said, "All right, fine."

Severus instructed Lily's family to hold hands and form a circle. He concentrated on the incantations and spoke softly, and Lily watched, amazed. For a moment, her family disappeared from her vision, and a fogginess began to fill her mind. She wondered what she was doing in this familiar house, but couldn't quite place why it was familiar. She saw Severus finishing some sort of ritual, but then he approached her and took her hands, murmuring something she couldn't understand or

properly hear. Suddenly, awareness flooded her mind, and she saw three figures she loved sitting around the table and holding hands.

Severus finished the incantation and took a step back. Lily released a relieved cry.

"It worked!" she shrieked, flinging her arms around her husband, overjoyed. She planted a dozen kisses on his face. "Oh, Sev! You're brilliant!"

"It worked?" Petunia asked in disbelief, for she hadn't noticed any change.

"Yes, you were here, then you weren't," Lily explained. "It was the strangest thing... not knowing you were my family or that you even existed, but then you returned, and it was the most amazing feeling."

A pleased look appeared on Petunia's face as she and Severus met gazes. Severus knew things would be fine between Petunia and Lily now.

Author's Note: Please check out my profile page and vote in the poll!

The Untraceable Charm is my own invention. It's not canon, but I thought it seemed plausible and a way for Lily's family to be protected. I figured Severus would keep trying to invent spells during his whole life.

Chapter Eighty-Six

In the weeks following their wedding, Severus and Lily's lives settled into a daily routine, but neither grew too comfortable with the seeming normalcy of day-to-day life. At the beginning of September, Lily started training at the Ministry in the Department of Mysteries. She finally decided on studying what it meant to be an Unspeakable, but even as she was subjected to the oddities of rooms full of brains in tanks, Time Turners, and whatnot, she felt she was only skimming the surface. She wasn't permitted to share information with anyone, even Severus, as to what was studied in the Department of Mysteries.

When they were at work during the day, talk among coworkers grew about strange happenings, mostly confined to the countryside. While Muggle news reports spoke of natural disasters and unfortunate accidents, most wizards knew better. Voldemort and his followers were on the rise, and they were striking in small, subtle ways, slowly instilling fear right under everyone's skin, a latent infection waiting for the right moment to attack and spread.

Thankfully, the Untraceable Charm seemed to be doing its job regarding keeping Lily's family from harm, unless they simply had gotten lucky and not been further subjugated to attack. Severus had placed his own father under the protection of the charm as well, even though Tobias had tried to insist he was tough enough without it.

Hogwarts started a new school term without Severus and Lily. Some adjustment to married life and working at new careers was needed, for not returning to Hogwarts was a foreign feeling.

Another Order meeting was held in mid-September, and much attention was given to the growing threat of Voldemort and his followers. Several senior members were given special assignments, and Severus felt a bit put out that Dumbledore hadn't turned toward the younger members for assistance. What were they, just ornamentation? What was their purpose, if not to help the side of Light?

Lily's reassurance, although welcome, wasn't enough to quell Severus's feeling of dejection and inadequacy. If only Dumbledore knew of Severus's abilities!

"Then perhaps you ought to consider sharing the truth with him?" suggested Lily a few days after the meeting was over and Severus was brooding in his armchair in their sitting room one evening.

"Dumbledore doesn't need to know the truth," Severus grumbled, glaring into the fire. "I think I've had enough of his usage of me for one lifetime, let alone two."

"Then why are you complaining about not being chosen for a mission?" Lily pointed out. "I wasn't chosen, either, Sev, and neither were Mary, James, Sirius, or Remus. He's probably just giving us some time to feel our way out."

"But my knowledge of events-"

"Do you have anything specific that could help right now?"

"No," Severus muttered. "I wasn't given my first mission as a- a Death Eater until almost Christmas last time. I was practically as much in the dark then, at least in the sense of being uninformed, as I am now."

Lily came up behind him and snaked her arms around his neck, kissing him on the top of the head, then placing her cheek there.

"Hmmm, that's your problem, Sev. You can't be content without feeling 'useful.'"

Severus allowed himself to relax into her gentle touch, but he remarked bitterly, "Perhaps that's because I always felt the need to be doing something useful before. It had been pounded into my head. I hated being used, yet needed to be useful. Not a good combination."

"It's all right to be upset about it, but it's done and over."

Severus sighed and kept staring into the dying flames in the fireplace.

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If Severus wanted to feel useful, his wish would be granted in due time. As the autumn peaked in the middle of October, the leaves turned every color of golden beauty, but the war grew, darkening the days. The daylight was rapidly shortening, and by the time Severus returned home most evenings, it was already dark.

While Lily was preparing dinner that particular evening, Severus went into the sitting room to start a fire. Ever thankful to be a wizard, he aimed his wand at the grate, and with a simple *Incendio*, a fire was merrily crackling away on the dry logs. As he was about to turn and help Lily in the kitchen, however, a voice rang out from the fireplace.

"Severus!"

Shocked, Severus whipped around, his wand defensively pointed at the flames. When he saw Dumbledore's head floating in the fire, he relaxed and lowered his hand.

"Yes, Dumbledore?" he inquired.

"I apologize for the last minute notice, but the Longbottoms and Edgar could use your assistance this evening."

"Just mine?"

"Lily's as well," Dumbledore explained.

Severus was about to excuse himself to retrieve Lily when she walked into the room. Seeing Dumbledore, Lily said, "I thought I heard voices. Hello, sir."

"Good evening, Lily," Dumbledore kindly greeted her. "As I was saying to Severus, your assistance could be used this evening."

"Oh?" Lily asked, her eyebrows raising in intrigue.

"As you are well aware, some Muggles have gone disappearing in the outskirts of Gloucester as of late. Frank and Edgar have been tailing Doholov and Travers, but those two now have a larger group of Death Eaters, perhaps new recruits, with them. We believe they are

behind the disappearances, and I would like Lily and you to accompany Edgar, Frank, and Alice."

"Now?" Severus asked.

"As soon as you are able," Dumbledore said. "I would have notified you sooner, but Edgar just Flooed me and informed me himself. He requested backup."

"All right, we'll be there. Where in Gloucester, exactly?"

"Meet Edgar, Frank, and Alice at Sudmeadow and Llanthony Roads... say, seven o'clock? I shall let Edgar know you are coming."

"Very well."

Dumbledore broke the connection.

"Seven?" Lily asked, gazing at Severus. "That's- that's only a half an hour away! Do we even have time for dinner?"

"I suppose we ought to grab something quickly and be on our way," Severus said. "Whatever it is we'll be doing, it'll be better to have some food in our stomachs."

Lily nodded and returned to the kitchen. Instead of the dinner they were going to have, they settled on chicken soup and devoured their portions quickly. Once finished, they didn't bother to tidy up, as that hardly seemed important right now.

Taking Lily's hand, Severus asked, "Are you ready?"

Lily inhaled deeply, closed her eyes, then exhaled and opened them. "As ready as I'll ever be," she replied. "Let's do this."

They Disapparated to the location specified, instantly seeing three others waiting for them. Keeping to the shadows cast by some half-naked trees, Severus and Lily approached them, keeping their wands aloft just in case.

"Identify yourselves," Edgar's voice demanded in a soft hiss.

"Severus and Lily Snape," Severus returned just as quietly, locking eyes with Edgar. "You requested our help, Bones?"

"Yes, I asked Dumbledore to provide assistance," Edgar stated, sizing up the two young arrivals, "although I hadn't expected him to necessarily send along the newbies..."

Severus bristled slightly, but Frank cordially greeted them. "Hello, you two. Edgar, everyone needs to start somewhere. It wasn't so long ago when Alice and I were freshly graduated." He offered Severus and Lily a smile, which only made Severus more irritated.

"Right," Severus ground out. "Well, here we are. What's the assignment?"

Edgar mumbled something about being inexperienced and no Auror training, then explained, pointing toward some nondescript houses farther down the street, "Attacks happened the past two nights here. No bodies even left, which leads us to believe the Death Eaters are either taking them to be used for some sort of experimentation or sport... or they're somehow leaving no trace of what they've done with the bodies. To destroy a human body, to transfigure it into a needle, let's say, and bury it, would still leave a trace of such magic being performed in the house. We have more reason, therefore, to think they are actually taking the Muggles alive."

"And when you say using them for experimentation or sport-" Lily started to ask, her voice mixed with disgust and trepidation.

"You don't really want me to answer that question, Miss Ev- er, Mrs. Snape," Edgar said grimly.

Severus knew well enough what was done with prisoners. They were the subjects of poisons, curses, werewolf victims, and worse... until they might finally be given the mercy of being killed.

"That's awful," Lily said in a small voice, and Severus placed a hand on her arm to steady her. She was still new to this whole experience, after all.

Alice gazed sympathetically at Lily. "I know," she agreed, "and that's why it's so important we be here."

"I trust we're not obvious to passersby?" Severus suddenly questioned. They had been standing around talking for the past several minutes, and despite the shadows afforded by the trees and the fact no one was actually outside strolling by on the pavement, that didn't mean they ought to assume no one would see them.

"Of course not," Edgar said indignantly. "What sort of a fool do you take me for, Snape? We placed the necessary wards and enchantments. Neither Muggle nor Death Eater should be able to see or hear us."

"And sense us?" Severus persisted.

Edgar growled deeply, and Severus decided it best to stop pushing the topic. Hopefully the man knew what he was doing. He was an experienced Auror.

At that moment, something moved in the darkness across the street. Everyone was silenced, their senses heightened. Severus was glad he wasn't the only one who saw the slight difference between the darkness of the hooded cloaked figures and the regular night.

For a minute, they followed the movement, but then it disappeared, lost. Severus knew the Death Eaters couldn't have Disapparated, as they would have heard it... unless they were well protected, too.

"Shit," Edgar hissed very softly. "All right, you lot. Let's move on out. Disillusion yourselves and stay in the shadows as much as possible. Cross the street here and into the back garden of the first house. That one's empty, as is the one next to it."

Severus wondered if the Muggles living in the third house had had any sense to leave. Surely attacks for the past two nights should have alerted them, but it was plausible that the Muggles weren't yet aware of their missing neighbors. The houses weren't very close together.

They Disillusioned themselves and made their way to the other side of the street. They passed the first house, going behind it, and continued on. The second house came and went. They were closing in on the third, looking for any signs of attack. The house sat quiet and dark.

"I don't reckon anyone's home," Frank whispered.

Edgar was about to reply when a scream issued forth from somewhere farther away.

"Wrong house," Edgar said. "Come on."

Severus's heartbeat increased as they moved swiftly across the ground, the tall grass brushing against his legs. He hoped the rustle of the leaves crunching underfoot couldn't be heard, but somehow doubted it. There was no Dark Mark looming above the next house, and from the looks of it, the Death Eaters had Apparated inside. No signs of forced entry were present.

"Move on in," Edgar instructed. "We need to see if this is the right house..."

A single light was on inside. Severus got the impression the house wasn't occupied by a whole family, but more likely an elderly lady by look of the ornaments she had in her garden.

A green light flashed inside, and a shout was heard. Apparently the Death Eaters were no longer hiding themselves from being seen or heard, probably because they *wanted* to impress their sudden appearance upon their poor victims.

"Inside, now," Edgar hissed, and they Disapparated.

Severus glanced around. He could hear angry voices upstairs.

"Idiot!" a gruff voice barked. "She was supposed to go with us!"

"Too old!" a higher-pitched voice argued. "She wouldn't've lasted a day."

Only seeing Lily by his side, Severus realized the others must have Apparated to the upper level. More shouts issued forth. Edgar and the Longbottoms had been discovered... or they had discovered the Death Eaters. Severus didn't know who had found whom first.

"Come on," Severus said hastily, pointing down the hallway toward the stairs.

Lily nodded quickly and followed, but as they turned the corner, she glanced into a small room off to the side and saw a pair of large, scared eyes gazing at her from a small crack between the door and the frame.

"Severus!" she whispered, stopping and glancing back and forth from him to the child.

"What?" Severus asked. "Lily, we don't-

She pointed at the child.

"Take him and get out of here," Severus stated.

Lily didn't have time to argue. She approached the doorway, and the little boy tried to shut it, obviously afraid.

"Don't worry; I'm not going to hurt you," Lily told the child as gently as possible, but her voice was shaking.

"What happened to Grammy?" the boy whimpered. "Who- who are you?"

"I'm someone here to help you, little one. Here, take my hand-

"I'm not going with strangers," the boy cried. "What-

Lily could hear a battle raging upstairs and shivered. She prayed Severus would be all right. Not wasting another second, she grabbed the struggling child by the hand and Disapparated.

Author's Note: Evil cliffie, yes. We're in the thick of a war now, so there will be a lot more battles and the whole

prophecy/Horcrux/destroying Voldemort issue will be addressed more and more, but not really overly much until "1979." We're still in '78. But yes, it's October, not much farther to go!

Chapter Eighty-Seven

Severus watched as Lily Disapparated with the little boy, his eyes left staring at the spot for a second after they disappeared. Another cry came from upstairs, shaking him back to the present situation, so he took the steps two at a time to the top level and quickly surveyed the surroundings. Different colors of light were flitting in and out from the doorway the farthest down the hallway.

As Severus inched his way toward the area of combat, a blackly-clad body suddenly was thrust out of the room, slamming hard into the opposite wall. The plaster cracked from impact, and Severus surmised the Death Eater was knocked out cold. As he cautiously approached the figure, he kept his wand pointed at the body. He kicked the figure in the leg, but there was no movement. Despite this, Severus aimed his wand at the prone form, and ropes sprung from the tip of his wand, tying the man up.

Severus now turned and took in the scene before him. The elderly lady was lying on the floor, her blank eyes staring at the ceiling. His worst suspicions were confirmed. They had already killed her.

Frank Longbottom, realizing Severus was there, called, "We could use your help, Severus!"

Severus scowled, but didn't waste another minute. Unlike most of his fellow Order members, he was not a reckless Gryffindor who jumped head-first into battle without thinking. True, he didn't waste time standing around like an idiot, either, but had he not taken the extra precaution of binding the unconscious man in the hallway, he could have easily regained consciousness and taken an Order member by unpleasant surprise.

"Crucio!" one of the Death Eaters boomed at Severus, who jumped out of the way just in time.

Recognizing the voice as Goyle, Severus shot a Reductor Curse at his opponent. Goyle, although fairly inept, somehow managed to block it. Severus inwardly swore and swerved just in time as another Death Eater shot a beam of blue light at him. Throwing up a Shield Charm, Severus moved farther into the room, finding it far too small

to be battling. Three other Order members and five Death Eaters, plus himself... too many people in that room. Most of the furniture had already been destroyed, but the mattress, although filled with holes, was still mostly intact. Severus smirked and levitated the mattress, thrusting it at Goyle just as the brute was about to use the Cruciatus on Alice, pinning him to the wall. The force of the impact knocked Goyle out, and he fell to the floor.

Severus was about to tie him up as well, but something hit him in the arm, stinging. He glanced down and found his shirt burnt away, and large boils were forming on his upper arm. Looking in the direction the curse had come from, Severus saw Doholov leering down at Alice, who was the only woman in the battle and didn't have enough physical strength to hold off her opponent.

Edgar was otherwise engaged with two Death Eaters, who were driving him closer and closer to the window. Frank held his own against Travers, who was muttering something meant to threaten the man.

Seeing his wife in danger, Frank's adrenaline pumped faster through him, and he threw a Sponge-Knees Curse at Travers, who crumpled to the floor, his knees unable to hold him up. Before he hit the hard wood, however, Travers aimed his wand at Frank's backside as he was retreating to help his wife.

Frank doubled over in terrible pain, shaking uncontrollably. Travers laughed maliciously.

"Serves you right for followin' us round like some lost puppy, Longbottom! Be a real Auror and don't hold back next time... if there is a next time!" Travers taunted.

Alice watched in horror as her husband twitched on the floor. Edgar was now pinned against the window, both Death Eaters' wands jabbed into his chest. He tried to Disapparate, but to no avail.

"No!" Alice screamed, tears streaming down her face. "Leave him alone!"

Dolohov, who had been intent on harming her a minute ago, instead turned toward the helpless Frank. "You love him that much, do you? You'll be next; just wait..."

Dolohov made to cast the Cruciatus on Frank again, but Severus ran in front of him, blocking Frank. He hadn't a moment to really think through his actions as he felt the curse run rampant through his torso and limbs, every nerve firing in agony. Maybe he had been influenced by too many Gryffindors, after all...

Severus's diversion gave Frank the opportunity to stand and fight back.

"I don't need to resort to using Unforgivables to make an impression!" he shouted at Dolohov.

Frank tried to Stun the Death Eater, but Dolohov was older and more experienced. From the floor, Severus was still recovering from being Crucio'd and therefore couldn't yet assist. He heard glass shattering, and his eyes lifted to the window, watching in a mixture of shock and horror as Edgar fell through it. The two Death Eaters by the window thought they had won, but a second later, a loud crack issued forth from just behind them, and Edgar was standing there, catching the Death Eaters by surprise.

Edgar shot a series of Stunners at them, hitting one and taking him down. The other was faster and jumped out of the way. This Death Eater wasn't going to play "nicely" anymore. A jet of green light erupted from the Death Eater's wand and dropping to the floor was all Edgar could do to avoid winding up a corpse like the old woman feet away.

Unfortunately, Travers had somehow mended his knees and was standing again, advancing on Severus, who was finally beginning to regain his strength. On his knees, Severus slashed his wand at Travers, but only a trickle of blood fell from the man's coarse cheek. Travers glowered at Severus, closing in to kill.

Frank and Dolohov were sizing each other up, Frank too afraid to act, lest Dolohov inflict damage upon Alice. But Dolohov didn't seem to care about waiting any longer. He pointed his wand at Alice, who,

Severus realized, had already been Disarmed, and inflicted the Cruciatus upon her. Her screams filled the room, and Frank charged at Dolohov, tackling him.

As the two men scrambled on the floor, Severus darted out of the way as Travers's Killing Curse coursed inches past him. Focusing his strength on the task at hand, Severus slashed his wand through the air again, but Travers wasn't like Mulciber. He was an accomplished wizard who could hold his own. He blocked Severus, knocking him down again.

Alice was recovering and shakily crawling across the floor to where her wand had fallen. Edgar, realizing their fight was fruitless, called, "Retreat! Now!"

Severus cursed. Frank and Alice were in no position to be Disapparating, and truth be told, neither was he. Edgar disappeared, leaving his opponent free to attack Alice, and Severus thought Edgar an idiot or a coward for leaving his allies like that. Then, suddenly, Edgar appeared next to Alice and grabbed her, taking her with him.

Severus tried to hold off Travers, but his Shield Charm was growing weaker by the second. Frank was still in a full-on fist fight with Dolohov, and the other Death Eater was now turning, ready to join Dolohov. His reflexes lightning quick, Severus grabbed Frank's leg and pulled. This was just enough to disentangle him from Dolohov.

"What the-?" Frank started to demand angrily, realizing his wife and Edgar were gone.

"NOW!" Severus bellowed.

Realizing he had but a second to retreat, Frank Disapparated, and Severus did likewise simultaneously.

Severus had Apparated to Spinner's End, of course, but there was no telling where the others had gone. Panting and bleeding from the forehead, Severus dropped onto the sofa in the sitting room. His arm was still covered with boils, which were oozing pus. Lily came running into the room a moment later.

"Sev!" she exclaimed, worried. "What happened? What took so long?"

"We couldn't help her," Severus said in between breaths. "She was already... dead by the time I got up there. Six Death Eaters... took three down, but hell of a good it'll do... seeing as we left three standing... to take their fallen comrades with them. What about the boy?" he finished softly.

Lily was dabbing at his forehead, murmuring healing spells. "You're bleeding," she observed, then turned her attention to his arm. "What'd they *do* to you?"

Severus waved her off. "It's nothing," he said, standing. "Is the boy all right?"

"He's upstairs," Lily said. She had a strange look on her face.

"Did you alert Dumbledore yet?"

"He's..."

"What?" Severus asked, unnerved.

"I think the boy... he's a wizard," Lily said.

Severus's mouth gaped. "Wizard?"

"Yes," Lily affirmed. "When we appeared here, he was frightened and inadvertently placed a protective bubble around himself."

"Well, that certainly changes things," Severus stated. "He won't need to be Obliviated, but-"

"But he's lost his grandmother," Lily replied sadly. "We need to tell Dumbledore now. No doubt everyone else has already reported... that is, if they're okay?"

"No one was killed, if that's what you mean," Severus said grimly. "Come on, let's get this over with."

Throwing a pinch of Floo powder into the grate, Severus called, "Dumbledore's office!" Lily and he stuck their heads into the flames and were looking into the familiar headmaster's office. Despite the late hour, Dumbledore was wide awake. He stood from behind his desk and approached them.

"Ah, Severus, Lily," he said, "I am glad you called. Edgar and the Longbottoms already reported. I know what happened. I am sorry."

"There is one more thing, sir," Severus said. "They didn't know, but there was a boy-"

"A boy?" Dumbledore asked curiously.

"Yes, a little boy, only about seven years old," Lily cut in. "He was hiding in one of the rooms downstairs, and I got him out before they could discover him, but, sir, he's a wizard."

Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully. "Indeed," he intoned. "In the morning, some Ministry officials shall come by to collect him. I will send word."

Lily felt a coldness go through her at his words, but what could she say? She wanted to protest for some reason, but maybe her emotions were just getting the better of her. Lily nodded.

"You have done well," Dumbledore said. "You saved the boy's life. It is unfortunate that the old lady didn't survive and that you were outnumbered, but you did what you could."

"Which wasn't much," Severus said roughly.

Sighing, Dumbledore replied, "This is a war, Severus. What did you expect?"

"Somehow, I expected better," Severus ground out, breaking the connection.

Back in their sitting room, Lily led Severus to the couch and sat next to him.

"Sev, what's wrong?"

"This shouldn't have happened," Severus muttered. "I wish-"

"You wish you had known about this attack?"

He nodded dejectedly.

"But how could you, Severus? You can't put that kind of pressure on yourself. Not even the most brilliant person could remember every small battle. Besides, like you said, things may have already changed too much this time around. It's the child I'm worried about. Poor kid..."

Severus knew Lily's natural maternal feelings would cloud her judgment.

"We can't keep him," Severus said.

"But Dumbledore was so prosaic. The boy is an orphan, Severus. He's just lost his grandmum. When you expressed your disappointment toward the headmaster, what did you mean? The boy? Or something else?"

Groaning, Severus buried his face in his hands, then quickly withdrew from them and stared at the ceiling.

"I don't know," he said hollowly. "I just thought... Frank Longbottom and Edgar Bones are supposed to be skilled Aurors. I have years of combat experience, Lily, and yet, we didn't succeed in taking even six measly Death Eaters down. I bound one and knocked out one myself, in hopes of the Aurors taking them to Azkaban, but they escaped. Surely their unfallen comrades would have taken them with them. And the one we were meant to protect is dead... We were too late. Too slow. Too uninformed..."

"But the boy-"

"Is alone now!" Severus yelled, standing. "Just like your son, Lily! He's an orphan because of Death Eaters, an orphan like Harry Potter was because of me, a Death Eater!"

Lily hoped his shouting wouldn't waken the boy. "Severus-" she started to say, her voice breaking.

"And the Longbottoms were tortured into madness with the Cruciatus Curse during my first lifetime! They were using it again on them tonight, like some kind of mockery."

Lily hadn't known about the Longbottoms, but didn't think it appropriate to pry right now. In Severus's rage, he developed a pounding headache, and the cut along his hairline in front split open again.

"You're bleeding, Sev," Lily said, leading him back to the sofa and forcing him to sit. "You can't keep doing this to yourself," she gently admonished, fixing him up once more. "This is madness... You'll drive yourself crazy like- like the Longbottoms under the Cruciatus if you do. You did what you could. We all did. You all escaped alive. Be content enough in that. Besides, it's no small victory to have saved a child-"

"You saved him, Lily," Severus whispered, meeting her eyes.

"We all did," she corrected him. "Had you not fought those Death Eaters, who knows what could have happened. Now, come on. It's late, and we'll have to face the Ministry officials in the morning."

Severus frowned, but stood and silently followed Lily upstairs.

Chapter Eighty-Eight

The following morning, Severus was the first to wake. Lily lay beside him, a couple of tendrils of deep red hair hanging in her face as she was turned toward him, eyes closed. He watched her for a few minutes, content to pretend that all was well in the world. Lily must have been exhausted, as she was still in a deep sleep. Not wanting to disturb her, Severus carefully sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

The room they shared was his parents' old bedroom. It was slightly bigger than his old bedroom, and since his old room only had a twin bed, they had moved into the master bedroom, even though it had been strange for Severus to be sleeping in his parents' bed at first.

The floor creaked as he walked toward the door, and he paused, glancing back to see if Lily had been awakened. She was still sleeping soundly. With a turn of the knob, Severus opened the door and stepped into the short hallway. He paused at the next door, placing a hand on the handle and closing his eyes. Not sure why he was doing it, Severus slowly pushed open the door and peered inside.

The dim morning sunlight was coming through the small gap between the curtains, and Severus could just make out the boy's form. He was a skinny, slight child, with dark brown hair that hung unevenly around his face. Severus frowned, reminded of himself.

He stepped into the room and crossed the short distance to the bed. Like Lily, the boy was sleeping deeply. He was amazed at how children could sleep through anything, especially how this boy could be still sleeping when his grandma had just been killed. Maybe Lily had given him something to help calm down, something to aid his slumber.

Severus realized he didn't even know the boy's name. Had Lily asked? She hadn't mentioned it in their conversation last night.

"I'm sorry," Severus uttered softly.

He gasped when two large eyes opened suddenly and were gazing up at him with curiosity and trepidation. Severus stepped away. He hadn't intended to wake the poor boy or for him to actually hear him.

"Where am I?" the boy asked, pulling the covers protectively close to him.

"You're... safe," Severus croaked, unsure of what to say.

"Where's my Grammy?" demanded the boy, a little louder.

"She's-" Severus started to say. How could he tell her the truth? "She's not here, but you're safe, uh- What's your name?"

"I don't know you," the boy whimpered. "Where's the lady who brought me here? She was kind."

"That would be Lily, my wife," Severus replied, trying to remain calm. He had never been good with dealing with children.

"Then what's your name?" the boy asked, a bit relieved to hear Lily was his wife.

"I'm, er... Severus," Severus said. He didn't suppose it necessary to be formal with a scared child.

"You don't look very old," the boy observed.

"I'm... not," Severus replied awkwardly. "So, then, what's your name?"

"Oliver," the boy said softly, his eyes meeting Severus's.

With a small gasp, Severus noticed his eyes were green like Lily's. Enough sunlight had penetrated the room for him to properly see them for the first time.

Before Severus could reply, he heard a rustling near the doorway, and Lily entered. She gave the pair a sad smile and came to stay by Severus's side.

"How are you, dear?" Lily asked Oliver.

Since Severus hadn't given him a sufficient answer, Oliver questioned Lily on the whereabouts of his grandmother.

Taking a seat on the edge of the bed, Lily placed a comforting hand on Oliver's forearm, saying, "She's... I'm sorry." Her throat constricting, Lily finished, "Dead."

Oliver's fears confirmed, tears welled up in his beautiful large eyes. He pulled away from Lily and sobbed. "N-no. But w-why? Who were those bad men who c-came into my house?"

"Oliver," Lily said gingerly, and Severus realized she must have gotten the child's name the night before, "they are called Death Eaters."

Severus glanced sideways at Lily. "Lily, I don't know if that's a good idea-

"But it's the truth," Lily said sternly, angry with those awful men for taking this poor boy's only relative away. "Oliver, you- you're a wizard."

This only caused Oliver to cry harder. "I could do things... things I couldn't explain. They did magic, too. Am I... like them?" he asked fearfully, his voice very small.

"No, Oliver," Lily said with heavy compassion, reaching out to him. "Like Muggle, non-magical people, there are good and bad people."

Severus was growing ever more uncomfortable with the situation. He gently took Lily by the arm and led her away from the bed, although she wanted to protest. Oliver was crying quietly into the pillow now and so didn't react to them.

"We'll be right back," Lily called over to the boy.

Standing by the door, Severus whispered, "Lily, I know you care about him, and he's just suffered a horrible loss, but it isn't our job to be discussing magic and this war with him. He's only a child."

"Exactly," Lily said defensively. "He's only a child, Severus, a child who has no one now. You said so yourself last night."

Severus was haunted by the incident, but didn't think it wise to be discussing such in front of the boy. "Come," Severus instructed her, opening the door. "This isn't the right place."

Lily sighed and followed him. They went downstairs to the kitchen, Severus taking a seat and crossing his arms.

Lily didn't join him. Instead, she set to preparing breakfast. A few minutes passed in silence. Finally, she said, "I'm going to bring something up to him. It would do us some good to eat, too."

Severus only grunted.

Lily placed a cup of coffee in front of him a moment later, watching Severus's face for any sign of emotion. He had closed himself in and was staring at the cup like it was a foreign object.

"Severus, what if we talked to the Ministry officials-" she started to say.

Severus cut her off. "We've already discussed this, Lily. You know we cannot keep him."

"Are you just saying that because you can't bear it? Because of your past, Severus? Think about the boy, not your own problems. He needs a family."

Hurt by her words, for they felt like accusations, Severus stood and stiffly walked toward the foyer, his back to her.

"I wasn't aware that my 'problems' were getting in the way here," he stated in a cool voice.

"Severus, you know I didn't mean it like that," Lily replied defensively, also hurt by his words. He rarely acted like this anymore, and Lily wasn't aware of how cruel Severus could become if provoked. The adult Severus, like a wounded animal, bit back hard, much worse than his adolescent self.

"All I'm saying is you ought to consider it," Lily tried to reason, hoping to move on with the conversation.

Turning around, Severus spat, "Yes, he needs a family, but I am not fit to be a father, Lily! We are barely out of Hogwarts. You, at least, are truly only eighteen. We both work and train all day long. We're both in the Order and having to go on dangerous missions now like that failure last night. When would we have time for a child? How do you expect to raise him?"

"I- I don't know," Lily stammered, "but can you blame me? What about my parents? They raised me, and I'm a witch. My mum doesn't work, and she'd love him, I'm sure of it."

Sighing, Severus realized he had let his temper go too far unchecked. He stopped himself, not wishing for his marriage to be like his parents' with the constant fighting. He approached Lily and took her in his arms, hoping Oliver hadn't overheard them, but doubting it.

Smoothing his hands over her hair, Severus let Lily cry into his shirt.

"I'm sorry," he murmured into her ear, kissing just above. "Your intentions are good and admirable, Lily, and that's one of the things I love about you: your immense compassion. I *do* want to have children of our own one day, but right now isn't the time to be raising a child. This war is a nightmare, and it's not fair to kids like Oliver who lose their loved ones, but we can't take every lost child under our wings."

"He's just one boy," Lily softly argued.

"But what happens when it's the next child?" Severus gently asked. "Oliver won't be the last child to lose his loved ones in this war. I know you want to help, but once the Ministry officials get here, it would be for the best if we let them handle it. They're trained for that sort of this. The more attached you are, Lily, the more difficult it will be."

Lily pulled away from his embrace, wiping at her eyes. "Then I'm just supposed to act like I don't care? Be emotionless and unattached like you tried to be for so many years in your first life, Severus?"

Severus opened his mouth to speak, but no words came.

"But you were anything but indifferent," Lily pointed out. "You care... cared more than you realized, and it tore you apart. Sev, you're capable of such deep love and devotion, and I know you'd make a great father. When I saw you standing over Oliver's bed this morning and talking to him, I was amazed. You seemed like a concerned father trying to ease his son's fears."

Severus shook his head. "I didn't know what to say to him. I had no words of comfort to offer. I was too bloody afraid to tell him the truth about his grandmother. No, Lily, I do not think I am that man."

A creak from above told them that Oliver was up and about. A moment later, the boy appeared at the top of the stairs and gazed down at them.

"What's gonna happen to me?" he asked softly.

"Oliver, honey, why don't you come down and have some breakfast?" Lily offered.

"I'm not hungry."

"Come, Oliver," Lily urged him carefully. "At least have some juice."

Oliver took a tentative step and then descended the stairs. Severus withdrew into the kitchen and prepared a plate for the child. At Lily's beckoning, Oliver sat down in a chair too large for him and stared at the full plate. Despite his statement otherwise, he dug into the food with relish, which seemed to satisfy Lily.

The meal was a quiet affair. From across the table, Lily kept glancing from Oliver, his head bent over his plate, to Severus, who would catch her eye and shake his head imperceptibly. Once breakfast was finished, Lily instructed Oliver to go back upstairs and wash up. Still in the kitchen, Lily and Severus cleaned up, the only sound the clanging of dishes. Their earlier conversation went unfinished. Severus murmured something about removing the wards from the house so the Ministry officials could find it and extracted his wand from his pocket to do just that.

Fifteen minutes later, a knock came from the door. Severus sighed and headed for it, while Lily stood back, wishing Severus hadn't raised the wards on the house. They would have never found Spinner's End otherwise.

With a start, Lily realized she was still wearing her nightclothes and frowned. She was surprised at Severus for not seeming to be fazed by this as he opened the door. He shook hands with two men, who were stepping into their house a few seconds later.

"And this must be your lovely wife," one of the men, the younger of the two, said, gazing at Lily.

Severus scowled. "Yes," he replied in clipped tones. "The boy is upstairs. I shall go retrieve him."

Retrieve him? Lily thought, not liking Severus's choice of words. While Severus walked past her and up the stairs, Lily approached the two men and introduced herself. They gave their names, Clive Rogers, who was the younger one, and Wendell Covington, the older man.

Before Severus returned, Lily asked, "What's going to happen to him?"

"No need to worry, Mrs. Snape," the older gentleman explained. "He'll be taken to an orphanage for wizarding children. He'll be around children like himself. He's how old?"

"Seven," Lily replied tersely.

"Well, you certainly seem to know a lot about him," Covington observed, which Lily thought a ridiculous statement. "He'll be off to Hogwarts in four short years, then."

"Four years is an eternity to a kid, especially one who's just lost his only relative," Lily pointed out. "We got him safely out of there. Don't we have a say in what happens to him?"

"But you're so young," Rogers blurted.

Just then, Severus was coming down the stairs with Oliver, who was watching the Ministry officials distrustfully.

"Ah, you must be him," Rogers said stupidly. "What's your name, lad?"

Oliver glanced at Lily and then at Severus. Severus was shocked when Oliver grabbed a handful of fabric at the base of Severus's shirt.

"His name is Oliver Rochester," Lily stated.

"Thank you," Covington replied. "Oliver, why don't you come with us? We're going to take you somewhere where you can be with other kids like you."

Oliver whimpered. "I don't want to go anywhere with you."

Covington offered the boy a smile. "Come, now, boy. We're not going to hurt you. It's for the best, trust me."

Lily looked at Severus pleadingly, but Severus gently wrenched Oliver's hands from his shirt and took one, leading him toward the men by the door. Oliver began crying in earnest now, and it broke Lily's heart.

"Surely he won't be kept at the orphanage!" she exclaimed, outraged.

"Not necessarily, but unless someone adopts him, which is unlikely since he's older-" Rogers started to say, and Lily wanted to slap him for being so insensitive in front of Oliver.

"You aren't proposing what I think you are?" Covington asked shrewdly. "You barely look old enough to be out of school yourselves."

"We're old enough to be married and fight in this war!" Lily said hotly.

"Lily-" Severus tried to reason.

He was handing Oliver over to the officials now, and it was a struggle. Both men had to take Oliver by the arm to hold him in place, but they weren't rough with him.

"That's not for us to decide," Covington explained over Oliver's cries. "He needs to go to the orphanage. There is paperwork to be done, not to mention the report on what's happened to his grandmum."

"Don't you talk about my grandmum!" Oliver yelled.

"Now, now, there's a good lad," Rogers murmured. Looking at his superior, he said, "We really ought to be going, Covington."

Covington gave a nod. "Good day to you. Thank you for your assistance."

They Disapparated with Oliver just as Lily rushed forward to say goodbye to Oliver. All Lily could see were Oliver's large, accusatory eyes.

"How could you just stand there and hand him over like that?" Lily demanded.

"Lily, we already discussed this," Severus tried to reason. "If... if he means so much to you, then why don't you talk with your parents?"

"Doesn't he mean anything to you?" Lily challenged.

"Lily, I- I hardly know him."

"He has a name, Severus."

"Fine, Oliver, then. I hardly know Oliver." He turned and walked into the sitting room, dropping onto the couch. "What would you have me do, Lily? I thought we'd already been through this."

Lily paced in front of the sofa. "I can't just turn off my emotions, Severus."

"Lily, please," Severus implored. "Sit down."

With a long-suffering sigh, Lily complied and sat next to him.

"You've been using my full name a lot today," he pointed out.

"And?"

"You only do that when you're upset."

"Yes, I'm upset, Severus! I don't want to see him wind up in an orphanage."

"That would be a better place for him than here," he argued.

"Why are you so intent in that?" Lily questioned. "I love children, and you would make a great father. I've heard your argument about the war and our careers and whatnot, but we could make it work; I'm sure of it, Sev. Oliver likes you. He held on to you."

"He was merely afraid," Severus disagreed. "I have no patience with children. That's just skimming the iceberg. While I want kids of my own one day, Lily, I have to be honest with myself. What kind of man with a past like mine can be a good father? Of course, you seem to think my problems aren't important enough to discuss, but my problems would be placed onto any child we have, adopted or natural."

"You're feeling guilty," Lily stated. "You don't want to raise an orphan because Harry Potter was an orphan and you treated him horribly. I know why you did it, Sev, but that is the past... another lifetime."

"You cannot possibly understand how difficult it is, Lily. I can't just wave my wand and forget a whole other lifetime." Seeing the rejection on her face, Severus softened, taking her hands in his. "Lily, I am still not a nice man. I have tried to be a better man, but there is still much I have to learn. Raising children is a huge responsibility, and it would be unfair to the child if I weren't able to do my part accordingly. You, I have no doubt, would be wonderful in every way, but I don't want to place the burden entirely on you."

"I wouldn't consider it a burden to raise a child," Lily said. "And I am not the angel you glorify me as, Sev." Sighing, she whispered, "Maybe you're right. Maybe now it's not the right time to be trying to raise a child on top of everything else."

"What about your parents?" Severus suggested.

"We can talk to them when we go over there this afternoon," Lily agreed, liking the idea.

x x x x x

That evening, they were back on the sofa, only there was a level of contentment that hadn't been earlier.

Lily was smiling. "I can't believe they said yes," she said.

"If Oliver is with your parents, he would be protected by the Untraceable Charm," Severus pointed out. "But don't get your hopes up too high, Lily. The Ministry has to decide."

Lily already seemed settled on what the decision would be and wasn't really listening to Severus's warning. He didn't want to break her bubble of euphoria, feeling like he had already dampened her dreams enough for one day.

"It will work out right; I know it will," Lily stated, her hopes soaring high.

In spite of the dire circumstance, Severus smiled, Lily's spirit infectious. He kissed her.

"How I love you," he said smoothly, and Lily giggled.

"Let's take this upstairs," she practically purred.

"I like that suggestion very much," Severus uttered silkily, taking her in his arms and up the stairs.

Chapter Eighty-Nine

For the next couple of weeks, life seemed to return to normal. There were no further missions for Severus and Lily to go on, and the next Order meeting wasn't scheduled for another week, leaving things mysteriously quiet on the war front. While Severus wasn't fooled and would keep alert for any sign of the Death Eaters on the move, he didn't allow those thoughts to consume his day-to-day life.

Lily wasn't thinking nearly as much about the war, but that was due to lack of experience. Instead, exactly a fortnight after the conflict in Gloucester, Ross and Violet Evans adopted Oliver as their son. Despite the fact that Lily's parents were Muggles, because they had raised a daughter who was a witch, the Ministry was willing to allow the adoption. Oliver had already taken well to Lily, and knowing he would see her often, the boy was happier than he had been in days.

The Order meeting in early November came and went. Few things had changed. People were still on the same assignments they had been given earlier that year, and all the while, Severus felt himself growing more impatient by the day. He knew what could (and probably would) happen to Edgar Bones and his entire family in early December. He had been one of the Death Eaters who had witnessed the slaughter of the Boneses last time.

Knowing he couldn't sit back and risk that happening again, Severus knew he had to be proactive. Whenever he would discuss the possibility with Lily about the brutal attack on the Bones family, Lily would suggest Severus go to Dumbledore for help.

But that would involve telling the headmaster the truth.

And Severus definitely didn't want to do that.

Telling Dumbledore the truth would mean putting himself at the old man's disposal again, and Severus loathed the thought alone of such a thing.

As decorations went up and the weather grew colder, Severus decided he would have to approach Edgar himself. He would have to

spin a convincing story and hope that the Auror had enough sense to listen.

Watching Lily play with Oliver in the sitting room at her parents' house that Sunday afternoon in late November, Severus's thoughts were elsewhere. Oliver and Lily had developed a strong bond over the course of the past several weeks, but Severus had held back, uncomfortable being around a child too much, especially a child who had probably been killed last time.

A shudder went through Severus at that thought. To see Oliver happy and playful was unnerving. Had Edgar Bones and the Longbottoms failed to retrieve the child the first time, if they had, in fact, even gone on the same mission in Gloucester before? Severus didn't recall ever teaching a student at Hogwarts named Oliver Rochester... now Oliver Evans.

Lily was in the midst of laughing now, and she looked up at Severus, catching his eye and discontent expression.

"Why don't you come join us, Sev?" Lily queried, sobering.

Oliver, oblivious to the interaction between the adults, attacked Lily's side with his hands, intent on tickling her. She laughed, hugging the boy to her.

"I'm fine here," Severus replied.

"But you're not even watching what's on the telly," Lily persisted. "It won't hurt anything, Sev. You look like you could use a good laugh."

"Lily-" he started to protest, his voice wary and pained.

"Just a moment, Oliver," Lily told the boy, who reluctantly stepped aside, turning his attention to the television.

Approaching Severus, Lily took a seat next to him on the sofa. He had been leaning forward in his concentration, and a few strands of hair had fallen into his face. Lily brushed these aside, pushing them behind his ears.

"I know you're worried about... you know what," Lily whispered very softly, her lips incredibly close to his skin, "but even you can lighten up for a little while and live life."

Her words were teasing. The tingle of her breath on his skin was driving him crazy, and with a groan, Severus's previous thoughts whirled. His mind fogged, and in his frustration, he sighed. With Lily around, although a pleasant distraction, he found it difficult to keep his mind as sharp as he used to.

"All right," Severus relented, "but just for this afternoon. Tonight, we need to talk."

"Agreed, and fair enough," Lily conceded.

She pulled him by the arm to the floor, beckoning for Oliver to join them.

Oliver gave Severus a quizzical look, asking, "Why are you always frowning?"

"I'm not-" Severus started to say, but seeing Lily's stern expression, he amended, "I'm not frowning now. See?" He forced a smile, which didn't seem to convince Oliver.

Oliver ignored Severus and went for Lily again, and Severus sighed, realizing he was a little jealous for Lily's attention. He had never shared her with a child before.

The rest of the afternoon went fairly well. After another round of tickling, Lily suggested they head into the kitchen for a snack. Violet had just finished baking, and she placed a plate full of biscuits in front of Oliver, who graciously took one, remarking that his grandmother had baked often.

Lily's parents set up a game of Monopoly on the table in the sitting room, and Severus joined in, although his heart wasn't in it, and despite his attempt to "live a little," his mind kept going to the conversation he would need to have with Lily that evening... and eventually with Edgar.

After dinner, Severus and Lily returned home. Dropping onto the couch, he realized how exhausted he was.

"Today was fun," Lily remarked, joining him. "Even you have to admit that, Severus."

"It was... not bad," Severus conceded, "but how can you spend so much time playing with that boy?"

"His name is Oliver, Severus." Lily scowled. "You really don't like kids that much, do you?"

"I didn't care much for the dunderheads I had to teach all those years, but I never wanted to teach in the first place. That isn't to say I don't want a child of my own... one day, but that's something that will take time. Oliver is a good enough kid, I suppose."

"It's all right," Lily said. "I know now that you were right. We couldn't have kept Oliver. This war, our busy lives, our ages... it just wouldn't have worked out."

I'm glad you came to see reason, Severus thought bitterly, wondering if his mood would ever improve.

Grateful he kept his mouth shut, Severus changed the subject. "About Edgar Bones..."

"Are you going to ask Dumbledore for help?" Lily asked.

"No, I'm not," Severus stated shortly. "We've already been through this enough. I need to talk with Bones directly. The sooner, the better."

"And how are you going to convince him that he needs to go into hiding? He's an Auror, Sev. He's not likely to want to hide. He might think that cowardly."

"Gryffindors," Severus mumbled.

"Actually, Edgar was a Hufflepuff," Lily pointed out lightly.

"All the better," Severus said sarcastically. "Look, that doesn't matter. The facts are what they are. He had been tracking Dolohov and Travers before, and the facts line up again. You saw what the Death Eaters did to Oliver's grandmum. Imagine an entire family killed, destroyed in a matter of minutes."

For the first time during their conversation, Lily shuddered. "I... can't imagine," she whispered. "I'm sorry I haven't been very realistic," she added after a pause. "Seeing your memories was one thing, but the reality of a war... I've only seen the beginning."

"I don't expect you to know what it's like, Lily," Severus said gently, wrapping an arm around her and drawing her near. "If I've been sidetracked and moody lately, it's because I can't help but dwell on this war and everything that happened the first time round. There's still so much I wish I knew, especially how the Dark Lord kept himself alive."

"One thing at a time, Sev," Lily said. "Maybe you can Floo Edgar later and see if he can talk."

"It's already too late tonight," Severus said, looking at the clock on the mantle. "He has young kids. Tomorrow."

x x x x x

The following evening, Severus stood in front of the fireplace, a handful of Floo powder in his grasp. Lily was busying herself in the kitchen, giving Severus the privacy he needed. Inhaling to ready himself, Severus tossed the powder into the grate, calling, "Edgar Bones's house!"

He leaned forward and stuck his head into the flames, seeing the unfamiliar surroundings of a kitchen. A family of five was gathered around the table having dinner, and Severus immediately felt guilty for calling.

"Snape?" Edgar asked in shock. "Is something the matter?"

"I, uh... sorry," Severus replied, turning red. "Sorry," he added to the family at large. "Can you please Floo back when you're finished?"

"Of course," Edgar said, frowning.

Severus broke the connection, withdrawing into his home. He went for the couch and sank into it, muttering to himself. Five minutes later, Edgar's face was peering through the fireplace at him.

"What did you want?" the older man inquired hastily.

"Do you have a few minutes?" Severus asked.

"Sure."

"It might be better if you stepped through," Severus said.

"Very well." A few seconds later, Edgar was standing in Severus's sitting room, his arms crossed impatiently over his chest. "Well, Snape? This had better be important. Why did you call during dinner?"

"I hadn't intended to call during dinner," Severus said defensively. "This isn't urgent... at least not yet. You have... probably a few days..." he trailed off, unsure of how to phrase his message.

"What are you talking about?" Edgar demanded.

"Listen, Bones," Severus stated firmly, "I'm just going to get to the point. You and your family are in danger. Serious danger."

"Well, of course we're in some level of danger," Edgar almost scoffed. "This *is* a war we're fighting, after all. But we have the proper enchantments on our house. We're no less safe than anyone else, perhaps even safer since I'm an Auror."

"You don't understand," Severus insisted, trying not to get too worked up. "Listen... you've put yourself at risk because you've been trailing Travers and Dolohov for months now, and as you know, they know about it. I overheard talk that your family was going to be targeted in early December. They mean to kill you all. You *must* go into hiding. You cannot stay in your home."

"How do you know all this?" Edgar asked skeptically. "And if my family is in danger, why hasn't Dumbledore alerted me himself?"

"Because Dumbledore doesn't know everything, Bones," Severus said, annoyed. "I was in Knockturn Alley a couple of days ago procuring rare ingredients for potions, and I overheard Travers himself saying it wouldn't be long until you were targeted."

Edgar didn't seem completely convinced. Severus almost dared the other man to try and argue, to try and say that he knew of Severus's past associations with some of the people who were now Death Eaters, but the Auror didn't say anything of the sort.

Finally, Edgar asked, "You're sure of this?"

Severus gave a curt nod. "Absolutely."

"Very well." Setting his mouth in a grim line, Edgar said, "Thank you, Snape. If what you say is true, it's better to be safe than sorry. You..." For a moment, he didn't meet Severus's eye, but then he gazed up and offered him the slightest of smiles. "I never thought a Slytherin could be so honorable, and while I had my doubts, you've more than proven me wrong."

Unsure of how to respond, Severus simply nodded again.

"Good night, Snape."

Edgar headed for the fireplace and threw some powder into it, announcing his destination. He stepped into the flames just as Severus replied, "Good night, Bones."

Chapter Ninety

The blustery wind whipped around Severus as he walked down the street. He pulled the collar of his coat closer, trying for a little warmth, knowing he would have used a Warming Charm had he not been in the open. He chanced a glance at the sky and was greeted by clouds rolling in, another storm threatening.

Dusk was nearly upon the world around him. The days were among the shortest of the year. Eager to return home, Severus turned a corner, wondering why he had thought today a good day to do a bit of Christmas shopping.

Probably because I'm trying to keep my mind off tonight, Severus thought.

On the plus side, it was a Friday, and he had gotten to leave work early. On the down side, it was the first of December, and he knew what that meant - the Bones family had been targeted in early December.

Upon rounding the corner, Severus scowled at a group of carolers. Making jolly was *not* on his priority list. How these Muggles could go about their daily lives as if nothing was jeopardizing their false sense of security was beyond Severus.

For the first time in over ten years, a Christmas tree was adorning the sitting room in Spinner's End. Lily had seen to the decorating, and not wishing to ruin her infectious spirit, Severus had been briefly persuaded to embark on a small portion of the festivities.

Now, however, he was annoyed and regretting it. Stroding past the irksome carolers, Severus shot a glare at their backsides and found the alley he had been seeking. He withdrew into the darkness behind some rancid dust bins and Disapparated.

Appearing in the foyer of his home, he removed his coat and gloves, grateful for the warmth of the interior. The smell of dinner simultaneously made him realize how hungry he had been.

"Welcome back!" Lily called from the kitchen, stepping into the foyer a moment later. "How did your trip go?"

Shrugging, Severus mumbled, "Unsuccessful."

Coming closer to him, Lily snaked her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Well, dinner's nearly ready. That ought to improve your mood."

Siddling into the kitchen, Severus dropped into his usual seat at the table. "Not likely," he muttered.

Lily set the food on the table and took the seat across from him. "You're worried about tonight."

"Tonight is quite possibly the night," Severus stated.

The Bones family was safely hidden, and Edgar had decided he wanted to fight back. An ambush was planted for this evening, and all day, Severus kept returning to the first time around.

Travers, Dolohov, Malfoy, Mulciber, and he had gone last time. Without Mulciber and himself, which new recruits would be their replacements?

Every time Lily played with Oliver, Severus was reminded of the little boy who Lucius had killed, the eldest Bones child. He was haunted by the memory and hoped, auspiciously not in vain, that the Order would triumph this time.

"-can't get too worked up," Lily was saying, and Severus's attention was drawn back to the present.

Severus sighed and nodded. He picked at the food on his plate, suddenly not very hungry. They were eating dinner earlier than usual, since the Order members who were a part of the ambush were to meet up in a pub in town closest to where Edgar had lived. Dumbledore knew of the plan by now, and convincing the headmaster of his knowledge of this event would prove challenging. Severus and Dumbledore had yet to talk face-to-face about the

planned attack on the Bones family, and Severus knew Dumbledore would be shrewd and suspicious.

"You shouldn't worry overly much," Lily stated with too much confidence. "We have the advantage this time. I'd love to see the looks on those Death Eaters' faces when they realize they've been ambushed."

"It's still dangerous," Severus pointed out. "We should win this time, though. After our failure back in October, I feel we need this victory."

To Severus, he personally felt he needed a victory. Rescuing Oliver hadn't been enough. He wanted to see more Death Eaters taken down. He was tired of sitting by and letting the war happen.

"As you've told me many times already, Sev, this is a war we're in. I'm quite aware of that."

Not as aware as you should be.

"You have yet to experience the true horrors of war, Lily," Severus said seriously. "While that isn't something I'd wish upon you, it's too late for that now. Before this whole thing is over, if it's ever over, you'll know all too well what war is all about."

"It *will* be ended," Lily said in earnest.

Severus had his doubts about that, but didn't voice them. He picked through his plate for the next few minutes, and once finished, they cleaned up the kitchen with a few swishes of their wands. Dishes in the cupboards and leftovers in the fridge, which was kept cool by a charm, Severus and Lily grabbed their coats, took hands, and Disapparated to the designated location.

The alley they appeared in was much like the one Severus had visited earlier. Wrinkling his nose in disgust at the smell of rubbish, he motioned for Lily to follow him. They checked that the coast was clear and stepped into the main street, finding the pub where they were to meet up with the others. They entered the small, dingy place. Only a barman and two customers were inside, and the two blokes at

the counter were plastered, leaning over their large mugs of alcohol and muttering incoherently.

Severus took a seat as far away from these two as possible, reminded of his father. The stench of alcohol emanating off of them was strong.

"What'll yeh have?" the barman asked Severus and Lily, who was joining him.

"We're meeting up with some... friends," Severus stated casually. "We'll order once they arrive."

With a grunt, the barman turned away, interested in conversing with the regulars. A couple of minutes later, a tall and graceful woman in her earlier thirties entered, followed shortly by Mad-Eye Moody. Severus recognized the woman as Marlene McKinnon. They spotted Severus and Lily and joined them. Moody was sporting a bowler hat, although he didn't yet have the magical eye, so he wasn't trying to hide it.

"Who else besides Bones is coming?" Severus inquired.

"Your old school mates and Dearborn," Moody replied, glaring at the Muggles with suspicion.

Severus knew the old Auror was thinking they might be undercover Death Eaters. He could easily imagine Moody's magical eye examining them thoroughly and stifled a laugh.

"Potter, Black, and Lupin," Severus muttered. "Typical that they'd want to jump right in."

"That means there will be nine of us, though," Lily pointed out. "That's only to our advantage. We should outnumber them."

"How can you be sure we'll outnumber them?" Marlene questioned.

Before Lily could reply, Edgar walked into the pub, his face drawn into a frown, which only slightly lessened upon seeing the others. Finally, five minutes later, the Marauders joined them.

"We're all here and accounted for," Moody said. "Let's be on our way."

They wasted no time in exiting, and Severus glanced back, seeing the displeased look on the barman's face. Had Severus been more lighthearted, he might have shrugged good-naturedly and given him the thumbs down, but he simply averted his gaze ahead and followed the others.

They walked to the edge of town and down the road until it wound into the country, the only light coming from a few stars peeking through the otherwise thick clouds. Hiding in the woods, they went over the plan and Disillusioned themselves. Edgar then lead them to his house, which sat dark and silent. They hid throughout the interior of the house, waiting... ready.

And they waited.

And waited.

The hours ticked by, and nothing happened. Not a disturbance came. They waited well into the night, since Severus knew the family had been asleep the first time, although he couldn't remember the exact hour when the Death Eaters had invaded the house. Severus grew stiff from being crouched in a closet, and his eyelids were growing heavy by the time a dim morning light shone in under the door.

He was about to leave his place and seek out Lily and the others when he heard Moody's voice shout, "Come on out, everyone! I think it's safe to say that they won't be attacking today!"

Standing, Severus pushed open the closet door and stepped into the hall. He watched as others came out of their hiding places, and everyone assembled in the kitchen. Once everyone was accounted for, Edgar, none too pleased, glared at Severus.

"You're sure of your sources, Snape?" he asked. "Because if you aren't, we've just wasted hours, and I've moved my family for no reason."

"Even if I turn out to be incorrect," Severus replied shortly, "hiding your family wasn't a foolish move. Your family is probably one of the ones in the most danger simply because of your position in the war."

"So, are you saying you can't be entirely sure that we were to be attacked?" demanded Edgar.

"I said early December, Bones!" Severus exclaimed, now annoyed. "It's only the second day of December, and the day has barely begun."

Edgar was silenced, but Moody stated, "Then we'll just come back tonight and every night for the next week to be sure."

James looked emboldened by this suggestion. He clapped Sirius on the back. "Sounds like we've got plans every evening this week now, Padfoot. Looks like you'll have to cancel your dates with Miranda, Susan, and Nicole."

Sirius laughed, and Remus smiled at his friends' antics.

Scowling, Severus marginally refrained from rolling his eyes. "Let's go," he said, looking at Lily.

"We'll meet in the alley on the other side of the pub tonight," Moody stated. "It won't do to meet in the same location as we did last night. Also, I strongly suggest you lot disguise yourselves. If you have Polyjuice available, all the better. If not, transfigure your facial features enough not to be recognized immediately. Should we have to return again tomorrow night, I'll bring along my stock of Polyjuice."

That was Moody, always being overly cautious, but Severus agreed with the old Auror's ways. He nodded, and the next moment later, Lily and he Disapparated directly to Spinner's End.

Flopping onto the sofa in exhaustion and rubbing at his eyes, Severus muttered, "Well, that was a waste of an evening. Maybe Bones was right. I can't know *for sure* that the attack will happen again."

Lily joined him. "You're worn out. I'm tired, too, Sev. Let's head up to bed and try to get a few hours of sleep. We may have several nights ahead of us like this."

"That's all well and good considering it's the weekend now, but what are we going to do if this is still continuing on Monday?"

Severus stood and waited for Lily to do so as well. As they ascended the stairs, Lily said, "We'll deal with that bridge when it comes time to cross it. For now, we need to sleep. We won't be any good tonight if we're too exhausted to even keep our eyes open."

Grateful Lily didn't ask questions about the exact date and time of the first attack, Severus shrugged off his dirty clothes and threw on a clean nightshirt. The moment his head hit the pillow, he was out.

In the late afternoon, they woke up, finding that the sun was already close to setting. Lily sighed, expressing her sadness at having missed the few precious hours of sunlight afforded in the winter. After refreshing showers and new clothing, they headed back downstairs.

"I guess we'd better get dinner ready," Lily said. "I hope it's over tonight. I don't like this having to sleep during the day stuff."

"I agree," Severus replied, helping her in the kitchen.

He levitated the plates and silverware to the table. Despite they had magic, Lily preferred to do most of the cooking by hand. As she had told Severus on numerous occasions, it was the way she had been brought up.

Dinner consisted of chicken, green beans, and mashed potatoes. The meal was a subdued affair, for all that was on either of their minds was the second attempt at an ambush tonight. After finishing, they went through the same routine as the previous evening, only transfigured their features, and ensured they were bundled warmly, and Disapparated to their designated location.

Severus didn't much care for waiting in an alley. He regarded Lily's blonde hair, which was curly and long. Her eyes were blue, which was perhaps the oddest thing about her. Her nose was elongated

slightly, and her lips were made pursier. The woman who stared back at Severus looked familiar, and after a few seconds of examining her, he would have realized it was Lily.

"Are you going to tell me how strange I look?" asked Lily amusedly.

"You're still beautiful, but I like your natural appearance better. It's too bad I didn't have any Polyjuice. I'll have to get started on a brew soon so we have it in case we need it."

Lily smiled at Severus. "Always the thinker and the planner."

Severus allowed himself a small smile. With his tanned skin, brown hair, and blue eyes, Lily thought he looked very unlike himself. His nose had to be transfigured for sure, since few had such a hooked appendage.

Seeing Lily's eyes drift to said nose, he asked, "Should I leave it like this?"

Lily shook her head, waving him off. "Nah, of course not. I like your nose just fine."

He snorted, but then sobered as three others joined them. Severus figured they had to be James, Sirius, and Remus, and after a minute, recognized them.

"Good job on the transfigurations," Lily told him, impressed.

"Transfiguration was always my best subject," James boasted.

Severus inwardly groaned, wishing to wipe that smug grin off the other boy's face, but before anyone could say anything further, Moody, Marlene, and Dearborn joined them.

Ten more minutes passed, and Moody grew impatient. "Where the hell is Bones?" he growled.

Just then, Edgar Apparated into the alley, startling Marlene, who was standing closest to where Edgar had appeared. Panting, the Auror said, "Sorry. Got caught up at work. Had to work today, yeah."

Severus thought the man looked completely knackered.

If he had to go to work today, it's unlikely he got any sleep. Hopefully tonight won't be wasted.

"All right," Moody stated. "Now that we're all here, you know the drill. Let's be off, then. Disillusion yourselves when you get past town."

The motley crowd walked down the street, which was thankfully empty. They passed the pub they had met in yesterday and continued down the street, past the town, and onto a winding road. The sense of déjà-vu strong, the Order members trekked until coming to the Bones residence. They resumed their places from the previous night and waited.

Once again, many hours passed. Severus felt the Disillusionment Charm and transfigured features wearing off and was beginning to lose faith, but then he heard a bang and remembered Travers kicking in the door after the wards were removed.

He heard Travers laughing, followed by Dolohov saying, "They won't be going anywhere. The Dark Lord instructed us very carefully. They're trapped and at our mercy. Now spread out and don't spare anyone."

Taking this as their cue, Severus waited for someone to stalk past the closet door.

"What the-? Wait a minute!" Travers bellowed. "Something's wrong here!"

Figuring the Death Eaters must have discovered the first empty bedroom, Severus heard a thump, then a yell. One of the Order members had jumped out of hiding and confronted the Death Eaters. He heard more movement and knew that the other Order members were coming out from hiding, surrounding the Death Eaters. Severus decided to wait no longer and left the closet, running toward the scene of the battle.

Order members and Death Eaters alike were already firing off hexes and curses, blasting the ceiling and walls apart in the process.

Severus saw Travers, Dolohov, Malfoy, Avery, and Rosier. He didn't waste another moment in assessing the situation, however.

Avery and Rosier were not nearly as experienced as the senior Death Eaters, and likewise, James, Sirius, and Remus weren't as experienced. The younger Order members were fighting the younger Death Eaters, which included Lucius, which seemed appropriate. Lily joined the Marauders, so Severus aided Moody, Edgar, Marlene, and Dearborn.

Dearborn was suddenly thrust back by one of Travers's curses, and he screamed, grabbing at his eyes. He was apparently blinded, and Severus had to quickly dodge out of the way to avoid being hit by Dearborn as he fell.

Severus aimed a Stunner at Travers, who was now battling Moody one-on-one. The Death Eater effectively blocked the Stunner and shot a stream of fire at Severus.

"Back, boy!" Travers jeered. "Think you're so smart, do you, you half-blood filth?"

Marlene's screams sent a chill through Severus, and he saw her twitching on the floor, obviously under the Cruciatus. Dolohov only held it for a few seconds, though, since Edgar was in full pursuit of him.

"Think you were going to harm my family, did you?" Edgar challenged Dolohov. "I've been tracking you for *months* now, and I think it's high time we put an end to this game!"

"Oh, I quite agree, Bones!" Dolohov snarled. "Muggle-loving Hufflepuff! You were pathetic in school, and it's a wonder you made it this far, but not much farther-"

Dolohov's taunt was silenced Marlene, who had recovered and hexed him. Dolohov's entire face erupted in painful boils, but Marlene hadn't stopped there. She had turned Dolohov's hand to dust, and that was the true source of his pain.

A well-placed Reductor, Severus thought, impressed and awed by Marlene for the first time.

Knowing this was Edgar's battle, Severus joined the Marauders and Lily. Rosier was already incapacitated. Seeing an opening, Severus chose to attack Lucius.

"Hello, Severus," Lucius sneered. "Ready to finally bow to the winning side?"

"Only in your dreams, Lucius," Severus hissed, "and even then, unlikely."

Severus fought fiercely. He was completely detached from any former admiration he may have harbored for Malfoy. Ever the coward, Malfoy panicked and started to lose ground.

"Ready to surrender?" Severus asked.

Lucius literally spat at Severus, then Disapparated.

Bloody fucking coward.

Avery, realizing he was the last of the younger Death Eaters standing, appeared fearful and Disapparated a moment later.

"Coward!" Sirius bellowed after him, but he turned and looked down at Rosier, binding him with ropes.

Moody and Travers were still duelling, but Edgar and Marlene were gaining the upper hand with Dolohov.

Marlene sent another Reductor at the bastard, turning his forearm into dust, and Dolohov screamed in agony again, blood dripping from the gaping wound and spattering the walls as what was left of his arm swung to and fro.

"Enough!" Dolohov choked, trying to hold his arms up.

"I'll decide that!" Edgar shouted, and with shock, Severus realized the Auror was hitting the Death Eater with the Cruciatus.

Travers growled at his companion's weakness and Disapparated, leaving Dolohov to his fate.

Dolohov was now the only Death Eater left, besides the bound Rosier. The Order members watched in stunned silence as Edgar struck again. Dolohov was nothing more than a broken and bloody heap on the floor now, but Edgar didn't seem to care.

"That's for trying to come after my family!" Edgar screamed, and Severus was shocked by the fury on the Auror's face, which was contorted in rage. Angry tears were leaking from the corner's of his eyes, and his teeth were bared.

"P-please," Dolohov begged. "H-have mercy."

"Why should I?" Edgar asked harshly. "What I'm giving you is nothing more than what you'd do to me. You deserve to die."

Severus watched in horror, seeing the gleam in Edgar's eyes. He knew that look. It was the look someone had seconds before killing another. By his side, Lily held her breath, not sure what would happen next.

"Bones," Moody suddenly interjected, his rough voice calm.

"What is it, Moody?" Edgar demanded. "Don't try and stop me!"

"Bones," Moody stated more loudly. "This isn't the right way. You'll be like him if you kill him."

Edgar's wand trembled in his hand and then fell, hitting the floor with a resounding clatter. Overcome with emotion, he stepped back and choked back a sob.

Moody Stunned Doholov. "Tend to Dearborn," he instructed Marlene, who went to Dearborn's side immediately.

"You lot," he called over to the Marauders, Severus, and Lily, "who will take the young one?"

"I'll do it," James offered, and Sirius and Remus nodded.

"Very well," Moody grunted. "Bones, go home to your family. You're safe. There's nothing more to be done here."

"It's over?" Dearborn asked softly.

"Yes, it's over. Let's all go home. Potter, Black, Lupin, you come with me to the Ministry with him," he said, indicating Rosier.

The Marauders complied, and a moment later, Moody and they Disapparated with the two bound Death Eaters.

"Is he all right?" Lily asked Marlene.

"He'll be fine," Marlene replied. "Can you see again, Caradoc?"

Dearborn nodded. "Good as new. Thanks, Mar."

Marlene nodded. Turning to Edgar, she said softly, "Take care, Edgar."

Edgar didn't reply, so Marlene and Dearborn took that as their chance to leave, feeling it would be inappropriate to stay. Edgar just remained standing there. This was his house, so he was technically already home.

"Edgar?" Lily asked gently. "You okay?"

Edgar shook his head. His eyes met Severus's, and he croaked, "You were right. I- I'm sorry I doubted you at first."

"It's... nothing," Severus replied, unsure of what to say, the realization that his foreknowledge had just saved the Bones family not yet fully sinking in.

"You'll be okay?" Lily asked.

"Go ahead," Edgar said. "This is my home, after all..."

Lily took Severus by the hand, and they Disapparated. Once back at Spinner's End, Lily wordlessly guided her husband upstairs. The impression left by the battle was etched on her young heart and in

her young mind now, and Lily was beginning to understand the price of war.

And this had been a win for them.

Mission accomplished, but it was only the beginning.

Author's Note: Real life has been busy. I worked thirteen (13!!) hours today! So... this chapter was later than I anticipated, but it's LONG, which ought to make you happy... I hope. There's a new poll up! Please vote!!

Also, I've created a forum where you can discuss this fic. You can join and find it here: [http: / www . fanfiction . net / myforums / Sindie / 46567 /](http://www.fanfiction.net/myforums/Sindie/46567/) (remove spaces)

Chapter Ninety-One

Dumbledore called the following morning after the battle at the Bones house, which didn't surprise Severus in the least. The headmaster had a way of interrupting them at meal times, so during breakfast, Severus stood with annoyance upon hearing Dumbledore's voice calling from the sitting room.

"Ah, there you are, Severus," Dumbledore said when Severus stepped into the room. "Good morning."

"Good morning, sir," Severus replied curtly.

"Do you mind if I step through? There are some matters I wish to discuss with you."

Sighing, Severus waved for the old man to come through the fireplace. A few moments later, Dumbledore was standing in the sitting room of Spinner's End, brushing soot off himself.

Lily entered the room and gave Dumbledore a small smile, knowing why he was here. Not as inclined to be short with him, however, Lily invited him to have breakfast. Severus shot Lily a brief glare, but it was mild. She pretended not to notice.

"If I wouldn't be imposing, then yes, thank you," Dumbledore replied politely.

Severus sighed quietly. Dumbledore was rarely one to turn down hospitality. He wondered if the headmaster had done so only to annoy him further.

The three of them walked to the kitchen, where Lily placed a plate of eggs and bacon in front of Dumbledore, as well as a cup of coffee.

"How do you take yours, sir?" Lily inquired.

"Just a touch a cream and two spoonfuls of sugar," Dumbledore said.

Laughing, Lily stated, "Much sweeter than Severus takes it. He likes his black, and I don't drink coffee, so this is a change from what I'm used to."

Scowling, Severus forced his gaze to turn to Dumbledore. He knew Lily was simply too kind to rudely ask why Dumbledore was here, so he took that honor for himself.

"Well, Dumbledore, what is it you wished to ask?" Severus posed, knowing full well Dumbledore's reasons for invading on their privacy at this early hour.

"Firstly, I extend my congratulations to you for last night's success," Dumbledore said. "I already knew of the operation involving the Boneses, as Edgar told me himself that you had come to him a couple of weeks ago with information regarding a possible attack on his family and home."

"Thank you, sir," Lily said cordially, but Severus wondered if Dumbledore had visited any of the others involved in the mission.

"What else did you come here to say?" Severus questioned.

If Dumbledore thought Severus too forward, he didn't make it known. "Secondly, I was curious, very curious, about how you came by this information, Severus, and why you didn't feel it prudent to inform me."

Ah, so the true reason for your visit finally comes out, Severus thought.

"I assume Bones already told you how I came by the information about the potential attack," Severus stated stiffly, "so I will not repeat myself unless need be. As for why I didn't come to you, why must it be necessary that I come running to you with every little bit of information I possess? The attack concerned Bones and his family, so I felt they were the ones who had a right to know."

"Indeed, while your concern for the Bones family's welfare is admirable, Severus, you are a member of the Order of the Phoenix, and whether you like it or not, I am the leader of said organization. I believe it goes without saying that it is my right to know any

information that it pertinent to the cause of this war. Any information could prove vital in our side winning, at least one small battle at a time."

Lily frowned, watching the conversation grow heated, at least on Severus's side. While Dumbledore spoke with a cool tone, Severus was downright cold in his delivery, which only meant how furious he truly was behind his demeanor.

"I understand that, headmaster," Severus hissed, "but without informing you, we were *still* successful last night. Because of our ambush, two Death Eaters were taken in. You cannot be arrogant enough to think that you are the only wizard capable of running an organization whose goal and aim is to fight the Dark Lord."

Lily figured Dumbledore most likely did think he was the only wizard able to do such a thing.

"It is most curious that you refer to him as the Dark Lord, Severus, and you are eighteen years old, even though I am impressed with your abilities, which far exceed those of any others your age." Dumbledore's eyes surveyed Severus over his half-moon spectacles, and Severus immediately threw up his mental barriers.

With almost a chuckle, Dumbledore continued, "And there you go proving my point by blocking me from accessing your mind."

Very irritated now, Severus stated, "I wish for you to leave my house."

"Sev-" Lily started to say, although she was worried about her husband's secrets.

When Lily spoke, Dumbledore turned his eyes upon her, and Lily blinked and looked away. Enraged, Severus stood, knocking the chair to the floor in the process. Pointing toward the sitting room, Severus barked, "Out of my house, Dumbledore! Now!"

Shocked by Severus's outrage, Dumbledore stood, calm and collected as ever. "Very well, Severus. There is no need to raise your voice. I apologize for any inconven-

"Just leave," Severus ground out. "It's bad enough you try to pry into my mind, but you *think*- you, you have the *nerve* to try and rape my wife's mind as well?!"

"Severus," Lily said sternly, "really, it's not-"

Holding his hand to silence her, Severus said between clenched teeth, "Don't argue with me right now, Lily. He's not welcome here."

Dumbledore nodded and left the kitchen. He stopped at the fireplace, glancing back at Severus and Lily, who had followed him, one last time before disappearing into the flames.

Severus immediately pointed his wand at the grate and began muttering incantations to ward off the fireplace.

"Severus, what are you doing?" Lily demanded. "You can't block the Floo Network. What if someone needs to reach us?"

"Someone like Dumbledore?" Severus asked.

"You know what I mean," Lily tried to say evenly. She firmly pushed his arm down and tried to take his wand from his grip, but Severus wouldn't release his wand.

"Lily-"

"Oh, honestly, Severus!" Lily exclaimed. "Do you really think what you're doing is helping? By getting so defensive, you're only giving Dumbledore more of a reason to be suspicious. I thought you were supposed to be a cunning Slytherin?"

"I am," Severus stated, now irritated with himself, "but some people... Lily, I cannot stand that man! He wastes no time in sticking his nose in other people's business, and I have plenty of reason not to trust him! Do you know what his last words to me were before I killed him? 'Severus, please.' He looked at me with those piercing eyes, and I felt like I had no choice but to carry through with the task. I'm tired of looking into those eyes, those same eyes that scrutinized me time and again for years, and I had to gaze back into them every time I delivered some report to him with 'pertinent information' for the Order.

I'm tired of being his slave, and I won't stand for it! I almost didn't join the Order this time around because of- of him!"

Alarmed by her husband's outburst, Lily approached him cautiously. "Sev- Severus, come sit down."

Severus crossed his arms. "Why should I?"

Huffing, Lily stated exasperatedly, "Stop being so difficult, Severus. Don't talk to me like you would to Dumbledore. Just because you're upset at him, that doesn't mean it's okay to explode at me when I'm just trying to help."

Sighing, Severus complied, but he didn't like being told what to do by anyone, even Lily, after discussing the man who had given him orders for years.

"I think it would be a good idea if you taught me Occlumency," Lily said, joining him. "You're right; it's none of his business to pry. It's plain rude to try and read people's minds and thoughts without their permission. If Dumbledore isn't going to bend, though, you're going to have to show him that you're the bigger man, Sev. If you know how he can be, then don't give him the satisfaction of reacting to his seemingly benign requests. Despite your history with Dumbledore, I do think he means well."

Aghast, Severus gaped. "How can you say that, Lily? He pretended to care for your son, only to train him up, knowing the boy would have to die at the hands of the Dark Lord. That's downright cruel. I could be accused of a lot of things, but I- I at least tried to right my wrongs. After Dumbledore's death, a biography was published about him, which held a lot of information few had known before. When he was our age, he befriended Grindelwald. You've heard of the legendary duel between the two of them some fifty... er, thirty-odd years ago, but they were *friends* before that. Maybe even more than friends. They had ideas of ruling the world, of justifying wizard supremacy over Muggles because it was 'for the greater good.' That was always Dumbledore's motto. For the bloody greater good. I don't even know if there is such a thing."

Surprised to hear about Dumbledore's past, Lily shook her head. "No one's perfect. Maybe Dumbledore realized the error of his ways and devoted the rest of his life to fighting for what's good and right? Just like you, Severus." Here, Severus wanted to protest, but kept quiet.

Lily continued, "I'm sure there's a greater good. It's just... I wouldn't want to have to be placed in a situation where I'd have choose between saving you, for example, and the rest of the world. That's a horrible decision for anyone to have to make, but you cannot let Dumbledore rile you up so."

"I'm tired of talking about Dumbledore," Severus mumbled, losing his resolve to stay angry. Lily's influence caused him to calm down a lot quicker than before. "If you want me to teach you Occlumency, I will do so, but it's not a walk in the park."

Lily's face eased into a smile. "There's nothing in my mind I would hide from you, anyway."

"Then we can begin whenever you wish."

Author's Note: I know it's a short chapter, but felt that writing more would be better in a separate chapter. I will update in the next two to three days, though, so you won't have to wait a whole week between updates! The next chapter will be pretty lighthearted and will be the "Christmas chapter." (which is odd to be writing in June) I figure after all these heavy chapters, we need something a little less angsty. Severus certainly could use the break!

I've changed the poll, so please check out my profile page for the link (at the very top) and vote!

Also, in case you missed it, I've created a forum, where you can discuss this story and ask me questions. The link is on my profile page as well.

Chapter Ninety-Two

The first snowfall of the season came two days after Severus had exploded at Dumbledore. Severus buried himself in his work at St. Mungo's, wishing to try to forget the incident with the headmaster as much as possible. He had lost too much control, given the old man too many reasons to be suspicious. If Severus wasn't more careful, he knew Dumbledore would figure out the truth about him.

Perhaps the only good thing that had come out of Sunday's events was the opportunity for Lily to learn Occlumency. The thought had crossed Severus's mind on occasion previously, but Dumbledore's attempted invasion of Lily's mind had been the push they needed to forge ahead with these lessons.

Severus frowned at the word. *Lessons*. He wasn't going to be her teacher. She was his wife, the woman he loved, for Merlin's sake! Reminded of the failure those Occlumency lessons with Harry Potter had been, Severus hoped Lily would be better at guarding her emotions. While he wouldn't be cruel toward her, he knew he would still lose patience eventually, but where Lily was concerned, Severus could and would control his temper. He was tired of arguing with her so much as of late. They would need to learn to work together as a team.

After dinner that evening, the pair of them were in the sitting room, only they weren't sitting. Severus was standing in the spot where the television used to sit, and Lily was standing just in front of the Christmas tree.

"Is this good?" she said, indicating the distance and placement.

Nodding, Severus replied, "Yes. Now, Lily, the first thing you'll need to do is remain calm and try to make your mind empty and blank. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yeah, that sounds easy enough." Lily had no reason to be worried. She closed her eyes and focused on her breathing, trying to work at clearing her mind. It sounded a lot like meditation, which was something she had only ever read about, not tried.

"Are you ready?" Severus asked after a minute.

"All right," Lily stated, opening her eyes. "I think so, at least. What's going to happen now?"

"I'm going to try to enter your mind. You'll feel my invasion. It will feel foreign. I want you to try to block me and force me out."

"But how do I do that?" Lily questioned.

"That's hard to explain," Severus said with a sigh. "It's different for each person. The more closed you are as an individual about your feelings, the easier it is to learn Occlumency."

"But I'm not closed at all," Lily said, a little panicked for the first time. "What if I'm rubbish at it, Sev?"

"Lily," Severus said witheringly, "you can't think like that. If you think you can't do it, you won't. You're the positive one of the two of us. Show a little optimism."

I can't believe I'm the one having to reassure her of her abilities, Severus thought.

"On the count of three, then," Severus said. "One... two... three... Legilimens!"

As he suspected, he was given instant access to Lily's mind. Images of a little girl in red-haired pigtails riding her bike... arguing with Petunia when she was about twelve... the first time they met at the playground... their first kiss...

Lily blushed. She even went so far as to giggle. Severus withdrew, sighing.

"What's so funny?" Severus asked, frowning.

"I'm sorry; I'm sorry," Lily replied, recovering. "It's just that- well, feeling you inside my mind kind of... tickled. And you seeing our kiss was a tingling, pleasant feeling. I didn't mind you being in my mind."

"Hmmm," Severus murmured, "it could complicate things... us being so close and all. I've never thought about the potential difficulty of teaching Occlumency to someone I love."

"Then what do we do?" Lily asked. "I don't want Dumbledore seeing into my mind any more than you do."

Going to the bookshelves, Severus scanned the titles and extracted one. He handed it to her.

"Here," he said, "read this and maybe it will help you understand the basics. It's possible to self-teach to a certain extent, but you will eventually need to practice with someone. For now, it would be foolish to attempt another try. Read that book, Lily, and we'll try again when you're finished."

Lily examined the book. *Basic Occlumency* was the title. "I wonder why this isn't taught at Hogwarts," she said.

"Probably because it's an obscure branch of magic," Severus replied. "It's useful, but few can fully master it."

"Who taught you?"

"Dumbledore," Severus mumbled ironically. "Although I'm a better Occlumens than he is. He is, however, a more powerful Legilimens than I am. The Dark Lord is a very skilled Legilimens as well. It was necessary that I be able to hide my true thoughts from the Dark Lord... even from false ones."

"Dumbledore must have really trusted you," Lily observed. "I mean, he was willing to teach you Occlumency, and if he knew you were so good at it, he could have suspected you were hiding things from him... but he seemed to really rely on you a lot from what you've told me."

"He relied on me a bit too much, perhaps," Severus stated bitterly. "I was his trusty spy, although he didn't tell me everything. In the end, I was still left wondering how Harry Potter was to destroy the Dark Lord."

To this, Lily didn't know what to say. She wanted to ask him why he still called Voldemort the Dark Lord, but decided against it. She offered him a smile and briefly squeezed his hand instead. She then looked down at the book in her hands and took a seat on the couch. "Might as well start," she murmured, opening the book.

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They continued with the Occlumency for the next couple of weeks. Lily read through the book in three days, and then the lessons began again. The progress was slow, but Severus didn't falter and neither did Lily. He knew she was an intelligent and skillful witch and simply had to remind her that she was more than capable of mastering Occlumency.

There was no word from Dumbledore or the rest of the Order as the holidays approached. Severus was grateful for the respite and for the opportunity to focus on his work at St. Mungo's more.

Before they knew it, Christmas was upon them. On the eve before, Severus and Lily spent the evening at home, knowing the following day would be full of familial obligations, not that they minded. Lily had charmed their tree with little lights, which changed color and blinked like electrical bulbs. It was the only light in the house, besides the fire in the grate, as they sat on the sofa gazing out the window at the world beyond.

A thick blanket of snow already covered the ground, and fluffy flakes were falling lazily, slowly adding to the depth. There would be no Occlumency lessons tonight, no thought of Dumbledore or the Order, no worries about the war... For now, they were allowing themselves the precious comfort of each other's company and the warmth afforded by the season.

"Our first Christmas as a married couple," Lily remarked softly, taking a sip of wine.

She was leaning against Severus, who had one arm wrapped around her torso. He was reclined on the sofa, his feet propped up and a couple of pillows behind his back for cushioning. Nuzzling Lily's neck

with his nose, he placed a tender kiss on the soft skin there. The taste of the wine on his lips and the heat of her skin were intoxicating.

"Indeed," Severus intoned, barely above a whisper.

He reached for Lily's wine goblet and gently pried it out of her hands, placing it on the table. Pushing her hair off the back of her neck, he grazed the skin with his teeth, continuing to provoke a reaction out of her.

"Sev!" Lily giggled. She sat up slightly and readjusted herself on top of him, now lying chest-on-chest. She went for his neck. "Kindly allow me to return the favor, then."

"Gladly," he said silkily. Lily's lips were teasing and sweet, and her touch was driving him absolutely crazy. She reached with one hand behind his head to move his hair out of the way, gathering it in a small tail at the base of his neck. "Your hair's getting so long, Sev."

Ignoring her remark, Severus groaned and sat up, removing his shirt. It was simply growing too hot in the room for the insufferable thing. "I think these need to come off," he said, indicating her jeans.

Lily unbuttoned and unzipped them, and they joined his shirt on the floor a moment later. They continued their ministrations on the couch, thoroughly enjoying each other's company well into the night. The fire had nearly completely died down, leaving Lily shivering.

Severus picked up his shirt and transfigured it into a blanket, wrapping it around both of them.

"There," he said, "that's better."

Lily rested her head on his shoulder and sighed happily. "I'm glad we were able to just enjoy each other tonight. It seems we've spent more time worrying over everything else."

Severus gave her a little squeeze with his arm. "I'm sorry if I've been hard to get along with lately, but I worry. I would rather, for tonight, at least, not think about those things. You're here with me, and that's all that really matters."

Just then, the clock struck midnight. Smiling, Lily murmured, "Happy Christmas, Sev." She leaned in and kissed him fully on the lips.

It was some time later when they eventually made their way upstairs to their bedroom, finally admitting exhaustion. Lily didn't suppose it would be a good idea to be too tired in the morning. Her mum expected them for breakfast at eight o'clock, sharp.

A few hours later, still groggy from not getting enough sleep, Severus and Lily woke up. Severus took some Pepper Up Potion and offered some to Lily, who graciously took some. The stuff worked better than coffee, but since they now had ingested the potion, they would have to avoid caffeine the rest of the day. Severus knew from personal experience that mixing caffeine with Pepper Up would keep him awake for three days straight.

After quickly getting ready, they Disapparated to Lily's parents' house, appearing in the foyer.

"Lily, Severus, is that you?" called Violet from the kitchen. A moment later, Lily's mum was approaching them, lavishing them with hugs and kisses. "Happy Christmas, dears. Do come into the kitchen and find a seat. Breakfast is just about ready."

As soon as Violet returned to the kitchen, before Lily or Severus could go down the hallway, Oliver came bounding toward Lily, throwing his little arms around her waist.

"Lily!" he exclaimed jubilantly.

Laughing, Lily returned the hug. "Hello, Oliver! I trust you're having a good Christmas so far?"

"We haven't opened presents yet," he said, pouting a little. "Mum says we have to wait till after breakfast."

Shaking her head amusedly, Lily gently messed Oliver's hair. Oliver turned his gaze briefly to Severus, and Severus gave the boy a small smile. "Hello, Oliver," he said.

"Hi," Oliver said shyly, still holding onto Lily.

Wondering if his presence naturally scared small children, Severus followed Lily and Oliver into the kitchen. Petunia was home from university, and she appeared somewhat withdrawn. The sisters briefly exchanged hellos and embraced, but Severus kept his eyes diverted from Petunia, still unsure of how she would receive him.

Ross was busy shaking his hand, anyway, asking after them. With their busy schedule, Severus and Lily hadn't seen her parents in a couple of weeks, and that was the longest she had gone without seeing them. The fact that Lily was faring well and not pining after missing them horribly was promising. She had adjusted to married life, and this, Severus realized, made him glad.

After a large breakfast, the family retired into the sitting room for the exchange of gifts. Oliver, being the only kid present, was the life of the party. His wonder and excitement at everything, even gifts which weren't his own, was charming. Severus caught Lily glancing over at him several times during the process, and he knew what she was thinking. She wanted a child of her own, and knowing Lily, that would mean sooner rather than later.

Severus avowed to talk to her later about that, since, for now, he had enough to keep his mind occupied. The energy of the day was infectious, and even he couldn't be down.

Later that day, Tobias came over for dinner. The Evanses were generous and kind, having taken to Severus's father and wanting to include him in their family's traditions. After dinner, when Lily and Petunia were playing with Oliver in the den, Severus found himself alone with his father. This was the first time he had been with him since his wedding.

"So, how's married life treating you, Severus?" Tobias inquired, swirling the glass of soda he held like a hard drink.

"It's like nothing I've ever experienced," Severus said honestly. "I love Lily very much, but we've had our differences. I think... I think she's aching to have a kid. I see the way she is with Oliver. You don't know this, but she wanted to keep him, Dad."

"Did she really? Well, that's not surprising. There's something about most women... a maternal instinct they call it... Your mum wanted a baby, and like I told you, you were born hardly more than nine months after we were hitched."

"I seem to remember you phrasing it more like 'She spat you out nine months later,'" Severus said before he realized *what* he was saying. The moment the words escaped his mouth, he regretted them. Seeing Tobias's expression turn sour, he amended, "I'm sorry, Father. I didn't mean-"

Tobias held his hand up to silence his son, and Severus wondered if the man his father used to be would return and reprimand him sharply, calling him all names in the book. Instead, Tobias said, "It's all right, Severus. I probably deserved that. I should be the one apologizing to you."

"It's the past," Severus quickly stated. "I did some things in my life, too, that I'm not very proud of... things probably worse than you've ever done, so I can't really judge."

Tobias cast Severus a quizzical look. "You're barely more than a boy, Severus. What could you have possibly done that was so horrible?"

"Never mind," Severus muttered, wishing to change the subject. Why did he always have to put a damper on a good time? "But yes, like you were saying, women do have that maternal instinct thing going on."

"Makes them a little mental sometimes if you ask me," Tobias blurted.

Violet stepped into the room at that moment. "What makes whom a little mental?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Nothing," Severus lied, forcing a smile.

Tobias and Severus exchanged a knowing look, and Tobias laughed. Severus had enough grace to behave, and before long, Tobias's sense of humor was on the loose, and he was sharing bad jokes with Ross, who had his fair share to give back.

Christmas Day grew late, and when it came time to return home for Severus and Lily, it was with an overall feeling of joy. There had been small imperfections in the day, but it was probably the best day either of them had had in a long time. After saying goodbye to everyone, they returned to their cozy home, their own tree twinkling to greet them.

"Shall we resume where we left off last night?" Lily asked.

Thoughts about babies briefly passed through Severus's mind, but his mind quickly fogged over when Lily began pressing kisses to his face.

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Miles away, at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Albus Dumbledore sat alone in his office, holding a glass of firewhiskey, swirling it much like Tobias had done earlier. The headmaster held the glass up to the candlelight, examining the dim light as it passed through the amber liquid. He took a sip and murmured to himself, "Curious. Very curious. Why would such a memory be in Lily's mind?"

Author's Note: I do apologize for the delay in updating. I realize I promised you a chapter in two to three days last time. I won't make any more promises like that, as real life has a way of demanding my attention. I admit to having writer's block lately, too. I had to push myself to write today. I've got two big, not-so-good things going on in my life right now. One thing I just found out about this past week and another is something I've been dealing with for a long time now. Don't worry; I'm not sick or dying. Neither is anyone I love. Suffice it to say that I will continue to experience bouts of writer's block, but I will keep updating as reguarly as I can. I simply do not feel like writing some days.

Please check out the new poll and vote. Thank you all for your readership and reviews!

Chapter Ninety-Three

The year 1979 had begun, the year when Severus had overheard the prophecy in his other existence, the year when Lily had conceived Harry Potter. Severus kept these facts in his mind often as January progressed, and although it would still be many months until the prophecy, if there even would be one this time around, he could feel his nerves growing more frazzled by the day.

Severus soon turned nineteen, followed three short weeks later by Lily, but their birthdays were of little consequence to either of them. Another year older, Severus kept thinking, and not much closer to figuring out how Voldemort would be destroyed. Lily would often tell him that it wasn't his responsibility to see to the evil creature's destruction, but now that the year of the prophecy had come, the reality of Voldemort had become Severus's main concern.

It was all well and good to fight in the war, to take down a few Death Eaters here and there, but what had been a nagging thought about *how* Voldemort had kept himself alive had grown almost into an obsession for Severus. He poured through the books on Dark Magic in Spinner's End, but nothing was to be found. He wondered how he, an expert on the Dark Arts, couldn't figure out Voldemort's secret.

One day in early February, Severus sat in the armchair in the sitting room looking through *Dark Arts and Its Many Secrets* for the third time. Lily stepped into the room and gazed upon him as she leaned against the doorframe.

"Do you really think you're going to find anything in there?" she posed. "Haven't you already driven yourself crazy enough with staring at those pages for the past several hours... and days before that?"

Severus noticed the concern laced in Lily's voice. Sighing, he closed the book and looked at her. "There's got to be something... somewhere," Severus stated with determination.

Lily entered the room fully and came to him, perching on the arm of the chair. "Brilliant though you are, Sev, even you can't know

everything. It's getting late, and besides, I can think of something that will take your mind off your worries."

Groaning in frustration, Severus replied, a little shortly, "Lily, we've been through this before. We cannot bring a kid into the world right now-"

And so began another heated discussion about children. Ever since Oliver, Lily seemed intent on having a kid of their own. It had only gotten worse since Christmas. Between work, trying to figure out how to defeat Voldemort, thinking about the prophecy, and Lily's baby obsession, Severus was frayed.

"You won't even hear about it... or consider it," Lily accused. "You think I'm spending too much time thinking about kids. Well, Severus, I think you're engrossed in those books too much. We haven't had a real conversation in at least two weeks."

His eyebrows drawing closer in agitation, Severus replied, "I'm trying to figure out how You-Know-Who protected himself from dying so we *can* bring a child into this world one day, Lily... when it's safe. Just because we haven't been summoned to fight in any more battles since December doesn't mean the war has ended."

"Then when is the next big battle, Severus? Since you're so wise and seem to know what's best, why don't you enlighten me?"

Closing his eyes and steadying his breathing, Severus reminded himself that Lily was actually much younger than he was and thus was prone to a certain level of immaturity due to inexperience. Trying not to hold that against her, he stated evenly, "I cannot be certain. The Dark... er, he would send me on mostly spying missions. I wasn't very involved in the attacks on families, and that kind of information was hard to come by unless you were in his innermost circle, which I wasn't at that time. It wasn't until I told him the prophecy that I was given that invitation," Severus finished bitterly.

Lily sighed softly and leaned into him. She could see the tension in his neck and shoulders. Running her fingers gently through his hair, starting at the temples and working her way back to the nape of his neck, Lily repeated the motion. Severus relaxed into her touch.

"I'm sorry if I've been pushy," Lily murmured. "I know... I know you're right, but it's hard for me to just tuck away what is becoming a strong maternal feeling. Maybe it's mental, but, Sev... I feel like I can't help it. But you are just driving yourself mental by searching for how You-Know-Who kept himself from death before. If Dumbledore helped Harry with this secret information like you said, I would say he's your best bet."

Noticing Severus's brief pointed look, she hastened, "Just think about it. I know you and he haven't spoken in weeks, and I know you're angry at him for trying to invade my mind, but Dumbledore is a resourceful and powerful wizard, Sev."

"Perhaps," Severus muttered, not convinced. "But speaking of your mind, Lily, it would be prudent to practice Occlumency again. You've gotten quite good over the past several weeks, but we've neglected trying for a couple of days now, and it's not good to fall out of practice."

Knowing that Severus was purposefully changing the subject, Lily decided not to push the earlier point further right now. They seemed to have reached an understanding about children, at least.

"All right," she conceded.

A bit reluctant to leave Lily's touch, Severus extricated himself from the chair and moved into the center of the room, away from the furniture. A few feet away, Lily stood and readied herself. Not as stubborn as her son and not having any of the animosity between them, Lily had proven an adept student of Occlumency, even though her feelings tended to get in the way. Realizing the importance of mastering this technique, however, Lily forced herself to be disciplined. Her determination often yielded promising results.

After Lily's breathing was calm and her mind was blank, she gave Severus an indicative nod.

"On the count of three, then," Severus stated. "One, two, three," he counted off slowly and then raised his wand, calling, "Legilimens!"

Lily reacted fast, erecting her mental barriers. She was able to keep Severus out of her mind for a minute straight before she began to grow weary, and slowly, her walls crumbled, and Severus felt an easy push into her mind. He saw a young version of Petunia glaring back, accusing Lily of reading her letter from Dumbledore... Then Petunia was older, asking Lily why she kept hanging around "with that Snape boy"... And there was Petunia again, stalking into the house after their wedding had been attacked...

Lily blinked, turning her gaze away. She fell onto the sofa, breathing heavily. Severus found himself breathing heavily as well and cast a concerned look in his wife's direction.

"Lily?" he asked softly.

"I'm sorry," Lily whispered, catching her breath.

"Why all the memories of Petunia?" he inquired.

"I- I don't know," she confessed, meeting his gaze. "I thought I was doing fine, until..."

Taking a seat beside Lily, Severus took her hand. "I think I may know the answer to your problem," he said. "Those are memories you've buried deep, and the fact that it was difficult to access them right away was a good thing. You managed to keep me out of your mind for quite a while. Most people wouldn't be trying to read your thoughts for much longer than I just did."

Lily hadn't given Petunia too much thought recently, but with her sister off at university and with being married and having a life of her own now, Lily now realized she had inadvertently hidden some of the more painful memories of her sister in her deep subconscious.

"How did you know?" Lily asked.

Raising an eyebrow, Severus replied, "That much should be obvious, Lily." Seeing her hurt expression, he amended, "You misunderstand me. I do not mean to say that you ought to be expected to know how Occlumency works. It takes years to truly comprehend such a thing... years of actual experience with it, that is. Even though you are doing

very well learning it, it's still a foreign magic to you. I learned early on about burying certain memories. They were the hardest to find. I eventually reached a level where I could almost completely bury my emotions from others. I could stare into You-Know-Who's eyes without flinching, and he would find nothing. I hate to think that you would ever have to go so far with Occlumency as to lose yourself like I did, but it is a precaution we must take."

As Lily listened to Severus's confession, she gained an inkling of what he must have been through during his previous life. Sure, she had witnessed some of his memories and he had shared even more with her, but the very thought of having to hide one's true self from the world was frightening and depressing, leaving Lily with a feeling of emptiness.

"You shouldn't have had to go through all that," Lily said quietly, searching his eyes, eyes which always seemed to burn with warmth for her.

Shaking his head, Severus murmured, "It is neither here nor there, but I hope you better understand why I wish to bring him down... or at least play a large role in it. I played a role too great in giving him power last time."

"Severus," Lily said seriously, "you cannot allow your past... your other life's mistakes to consume you like this. You already did enough, more than enough, last time for what is honorable and good."

"But the prophecy-"

"Is not until many months from now, if things go as you've told me." Pausing, a horrific thought came to Lily, sending chills down her spine. "Sev, did- did you think if we had a baby that he or she would be marked by him? Were you worried... that history would repeat itself, and I would die protecting the child?"

Shaking a little at the thought of such a thing happening, for Severus could see it playing out in his mind, he nodded. "Y-yes," he said in an uncharacteristically small voice. Finding his resolve, he continued, "Which is why I was so upset over talk of having a child. It wasn't just about bringing a child into this world when there's a war going on, but

it was much more than that. I won't lose you again, Lily. I just won't. I can't. The thought-" he stopped, unable to finish, a shudder passing through his body.

"I'm sorry I pressed you, Sev," Lily uttered gently. She brought a hand to his cheek, and he leaned into it, closing his eyes briefly. "I can understand why you've been seeking an answer to You-Know-Who's immortality so fervently as of late."

"It seems we both have been misunderstanding the other's intentions lately," Severus conceded. Smiling ironically, he added, "We probably should have had this conversation weeks ago."

"Probably," Lily quipped.

In spite of the heaviness of their words, both felt a burden lifted off their shoulders. Once again, they realized that facing the future together was better than doing so apart.

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Two weeks later, the first Order meeting in a while was held. Lily's Occlumency skills were thankfully strong, so Severus's concern over Dumbledore potentially trying to access her thoughts was low. He wasn't looking forward to seeing the old wizard again, though. They hadn't spoken since December, but in a room full of people, Severus doubted Dumbledore would try anything foolish.

The pair arrived five minutes before the meeting was scheduled to commence. The moment they entered the basement of the Hog's Head, Mary raced toward Lily, evidently happy to see her friend.

"Lily, it's been ages!" she exclaimed. "How've you been?"

Lily gave Mary a small smile, but wasn't too pleased that she hadn't asked after her husband's welfare as well. "Hi, Mary," she returned. "We're doing well enough, you know. How are you? Are you still dating James?"

Here, Mary blushed. "More than dating, I should say." Holding out her hand for Lily to see, Mary's finger donned a ring, the diamond quite large.

Severus quickly looked away from the ring and found James staring back at them, a large grin on his face.

Typical of Potter to show off. No doubt his wealth is part of the reason Macdonald finds him such a catch.

James sauntered over to the trio, joined momentarily by Sirius and Remus. "Hello, Lily... Snape," James greeted them. "I trust Mary has already told you?"

"Yes, congratulations, both of you," Lily said kindly, although aware of James's smug attitude. "Have you set a date?"

"Not yet," Mary replied, sounding disappointed. Here, Severus smirked at James.

"You might want to get on that, Prongs," Sirius pointed out.

For once, we agree on something, Black, Severus thought.

"Speaking of dates," Sirius blurted, "Lily, is your sister seeing anyone?"

Severus scowled, wishing the Untraceable Charm hadn't been shared with the Mary and the Marauders, but Lily had felt they should know the truth, along with Dumbledore, which had given Severus further ire a few months back. But it was Lily's family that was protected, after all, and she had a right to reveal the truth to whomever she desired.

Lily momentarily blanched at Sirius's question. She had thought his fascination with Petunia nothing more than a passing fad, and Petunia had given up asking after Sirius months ago.

"Uh, y-yes," Lily stammered. "Why?"

Shrugging nonchalantly, Sirius replied, "No reason."

"Oh, right, Padfoot," James said sardonically. "You inquiring after girls *always* means something."

"Are you done dating Miranda, then?" asked Remus, to which Sirius cast his friend a mock affronted look.

"Miranda and I weren't a proper couple," Sirius stated.

Severus, tired of this frivolous conversation, quietly excused himself and took a seat at the table as far away from Dumbledore as possible. Thankfully, Dumbledore was engaged in a hushed conversation with Aberforth and Diggle. Severus wouldn't be surprised if they were employing a charm to make their voices sound inaudible. He chose to take the seat next to Frank Longbottom, who was a kind enough bloke.

"Hello, Severus," Frank politely greeted him. Beside Frank, Alice smiled at Severus.

"Good evening, Frank... Alice," Severus murmured. Choosing not to be as formal with the couple, as they had become more than allies in the battle they had fought together months ago, Severus hoped his address would not be missed.

Frank did notice the use of her given name, and his smile broadened. "How's married life treating you?" he asked.

"It's going well," Severus replied carefully, not wishing to divulge anything too grave. "And you are both well, I trust?"

"Oh, more than well," Alice suddenly interjected. "Should I share the good news or let you do it, Frank?"

Severus's mouth went dry for a moment, but then Lily was sliding into the seat next to him. "What good news?" she inquired brightly.

"I'm pregnant," Alice declared, her already broad smile even wider.

"Congratulations!" Lily practically squealed, causing Severus to withdraw in shock.

"Yes, uh, congratulations," Severus managed after recovering from Lily's obvious delight.

Frowning inwardly, Severus thought, *But that can't be right. Neville Longbottom wasn't born until the day before Harry Potter.*

With a sinking feeling, Severus wondered if Alice might miscarry this baby... unless Neville's conception date had somehow been shifted in this life. He couldn't tell she was pregnant yet, so it must have still been early. Lily caught his expression, but kept quiet.

Just as the Longbottoms expressed their gratitude, Dumbledore stood and announced, "If everyone could please find a seat, we will begin the meeting."

People shuffled around the room, dropping into empty chairs, and the chatter died down.

"I have some good news to report," Dumbledore began. "As many of you know, Alastor led a group that defended the Bones family back in December. Thanks to Severus's knowledge of the event," Dumbledore said, his eyes resting on Severus briefly here, "we were able to place the Bones family into hiding and apprehend the Death Eaters. Two were taken into custody. Since then, attacks have died down, perhaps because Lord Voldemort suspects we have inside information now. This, however, will not last. In fact, he is already on the move again. Alastor, why don't you share with the rest of us what you know?"

"Certainly, Albus," Moody grunted, standing. "Word has it that he's recruiting again. The Aurors have been keeping watches on several northern towns and cities..."

Moody proceeded to explain their findings. Although no attacks had yet come, it was only a matter of time. Among the cities listed was Manchester, and Severus watched Lily's face drain of color.

They locked eyes. He knew what she was thinking.

Chapter Ninety-Four

After the Order meeting ended, Severus wanted nothing more than to leave the Hog's Head as quickly as possible. Regrettably, James and Mary approached them, although Mary's eyes were solely on Lily as she said, "I'm sure everything will be okay, Lily."

Lily gave her friend a weak smile. "Thanks, Mary."

"What about the charm you placed on your family?" asked James. "Won't that protect them just fine?"

"Actually, James, Severus placed the charm on them, and I-"

"We are confident that it will do as it was designed to do," Severus cut in abruptly, glaring at James.

It wasn't so much that Severus was annoyed at James for questioning the strength of his charm; it was more the fact that his concern for Lily and her family were manifesting themselves in irritation and a shortness with others.

Lily resumed conversing with her friends, and Severus gazed about the room. About half of the people had left, and although Dumbledore was quietly talking with Moody, the old wizard glanced up and briefly met Severus's eyes. Severus blinked, then turned his head, watching Lily again, having no desire to speak with Dumbledore.

"We really should be going, Lily," Severus interrupted.

Mary looked affronted at Severus's statement. "Perhaps tonight isn't so good for joining us for drinks, then?" she asked, glaring at Severus.

Lily wanted to sigh. While she knew why Severus was eager to leave, she had hoped that he would have warmed more toward her friends... who could have been his friends if he made more of an effort.

"I'm sorry," Lily apologized, taking her husband's hand roughly. "Another time, I promise."

"Right," James replied sarcastically. "Only if your esteemed husband sees reason to give you a longer leash."

James's words pushed Severus's carefully-checked temper teetering over the edge. "Enough!" he hissed, glowering at James. "Potter, you will kindly refrain from ever so much as insinuating that I treat Lily like some sort of- of dog."

"Severus!" Lily exclaimed, shocked. "I don't think James meant-"

"I don't care what he meant," Severus said hotly. "We won't be 'having drinks' with you and your wife-to-be, Potter, any time soon."

With that, Severus practically yanked Lily out of the basement. Once outside, Lily pulled her hand from her husband's firm grasp, planting both hands on her hips.

Her eyes slits, she asked waspishly, "Do you *care* to enlighten me as to what that was about, Severus?"

Lily felt like they were four or five years in the past, and she had a difficult time fathoming that the man standing in front of her was truly much older than he appeared.

Frowning, Severus tried to speak, but Lily cut him off. "No, I don't want to hear it, Severus. For all your experience and growth, sometimes you still revert back to acting like a jealous teenager. I know you're worried, okay? You think I'm not? But getting angry at James and Mary isn't going to make anything any easier."

Seeing the slight hurt in Severus's eyes, Lily relented, sighing softly. For his part, Severus's anger had rapidly abated upon hearing Lily's seeming accusation. Had he learned nothing? How could he have let James get to him?

"Lily, please," Severus whispered, his voice verging on pleading, "I'm sorry." He took her hand in earnest. "Let's go home. This isn't the place to be having this discussion."

Lily nodded despondently. A moment later, they were back in the foyer of Spinner's End. Severus shrugged out of his coat and gingerly

helped Lily remove hers, hanging both of them on the coat rack by the door. Before either of them uttered another word, Lily was burying her face in Severus's shirt, clutching at the fabric. She was shaking, and Severus knew she was crying.

Bringing a hand to the back of her head, he gently smoothed her hair, running his fingers lightly through the dark red tendrils, which just brushed her shoulders. He wrapped his other arm around her and drew her a little closer.

"Your family is safe," he tried to reassure her.

The rumble of his voice in his chest eased Lily's fears. She stilled her tears and gazed up at her husband's face, which was shadowed from the darkness. Bringing her hands to each cheek, she pushed his hair behind his ears so she could see him better.

"I didn't mean to sound like I was accusing you of anything, Sev," she said softly. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. I just... I wish you would be a little more open to friendships with others, though. It would help to know we're not so alone, especially if something were to happen to our families."

"Oh, Lily," Severus sighed, any small trace of his earlier agitation leaving him, "don't think like that, but maybe... okay." He paused, then asked stiffly, "When would you like to go for drinks with Potter and Macdonald?"

Lightly amused by his formal tone and phrasing of the question, Lily smiled. "I think it would help if you started referring to them as James and Mary, Sev."

"Hmmm," was all Severus said, not comfortable with the familiarity.

Tugging him toward the sitting room, Lily led Severus into the center of the room, and they found comfortable spots on the old sofa and faced each other.

"Do you really think my family is safe?" Lily inquired, unable to keep her fears at bay.

"Safer than most," Severus replied. "Unless someone who knows the truth about them betrays that information, you are fine, and I doubt Potter and his friends or Dumbledore would ever betray you, as much as they might be annoying. They are, however, loyal."

At the mention of Dumbledore, Lily asked, "Do you think Dumbledore suspects anything? I saw the way he kept glancing in your direction during the meeting, especially when he mentioned that it was you who gave the tip about the Boneses."

"I wondered the same thing," Severus replied thoughtfully.

"But wouldn't he have already summoned you by now if he were *that* suspicious? Wouldn't he have kept you after the meeting to talk?"

"Dumbledore is a patient man, Lily. He can wait as long as he deems necessary before making the next move, but when he makes that move, it's high time to watch out."

"Are you afraid of him?"

Severus shrugged. "Not as much as he probably wishes. I had been fearful of him when I was this age in my other life, but I also knew I could go to him for help... at least I thought I could. In the end, he wasn't able to keep you and your family safe, Lily. I learned much later in life that he always had an ulterior motive for everything, which is why I cannot put the same trust in him now. This is nothing I haven't told you before, though." Severus fell silent, wondering where this conversation was going.

They could only rehash the same ideas, theories, and opinions so many times before their discussions became pointless.

"I'm happy for Frank and Alice," Lily suddenly stated, perhaps to ease the earlier tension. "I meant to ask her when she's due." Seeing the strange expression cross Severus's face again at the mention of the Longbottoms' baby, Lily questioned, "What is it, Sev?"

"The Longbottoms did, in fact, have a baby, but he wasn't born until July 30, 1980. Since Alice isn't yet showing, she's probably in her first

two months right now. She's likely due in September or October, which is several months before Neville, who was their son, was born."

"Do you think she might lose this baby, then?" Lily asked sadly, gazing down at her own stomach as she placed her hands there.

"I don't know," Severus confessed. "I should hope not, but it is entirely possible that they will have a different child, or perhaps Neville will be born early. As I told you, things aren't likely to go exactly as they did before, meaning that my information about what the Dark Lord and his followers are up to is limited. I did not know, for example, about possible attacks on Manchester."

Lily shuddered again, wishing the conversation hadn't drifted back to this topic. "Your parents were already gone by that time, right?"

"Yes. My mum hanged herself just as she had almost two years ago, and my dad died that summer by getting hit by a car. He never recovered from his alcoholism."

"Then you weren't living here?"

Severus shook his head. "No, I was living with... my old *friends*," he sneered the word. "That didn't last long, though."

"And I was married to James." Lily laughed at that wild thought, then quickly sobered. "We really should go out with James and Mary some time soon, Sev. To congratulate them and celebrate their engagement. It would bring some normalcy to our lives. It feels like all we do is work and worry."

Severus was about to protest, but knew it would be selfish to deny Lily a little fun. They rarely went out as it was, and he often wondered if he was a bad husband because of his reclusive ways. Having been a bachelor for years, Severus still was adjusting to sharing his life with another.

"Very well," he finally gave in. "You can pick the time and date and where. I know next to nothing about organizing such a thing." His lip curled distastefully at planning engagements. "Isn't that something, er... women enjoy doing, anyway?"

Lily smiled ruefully and gently smacked his arm. "Sev, you're awful. All right, I'll be in touch with Mary and set a date."

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Two weeks later, Severus and Lily were walking down York Street in downtown Manchester. There hadn't yet been any attacks in the city, but news of two families disappearing in nearby towns had occurred last week. Neither of them had been called to duty for the Order, however.

As they walked, Severus glanced about, keeping his guard up. It was unlikely that Death Eaters would attack during the early evening when too many people were out and about. The winter snows had given way to chilling rain, and as they walked, they had to avoid puddles.

Lily fretted unnecessarily over her hair, which Severus thought silly. Before leaving the house, she had tried pulling it back in a ponytail, only the hair in the front was still a little too short and kept falling into her face.

"Oh, just forget it, then!" she finally exclaimed, pulling the elastic out of her hair.

Looking at Lily sideways, Severus asked, "What's the matter?"

"This is the first time we've gone out with friends, Sev. I wanted to look nice, that's all."

"You look beautiful already," he assured her, taking her arm in his. "Come, we're nearly there." Severus wondered why Lily was even worried about her looks, since she usually wasn't the type of girl who cared much about that sort of thing.

They reached Barmy's Pub and entered the place. It was much nicer than the pub the Order members had met up in when they were in Gloucester. Upon entering, Severus crinkled his nose at the smoke. The atmosphere was hazy from all the cigarettes, and he could also smell the stench of alcohol. This, however, wasn't the type of pub Tobias would have frequented. It was much too "happening" for the lonely drinker.

Music played, and people danced and mingled. Severus raised his eyebrows and gave Lily one of his looks.

"Who picked this place?" he inquired.

"Petunia told me about it once," Lily admitted. "Since Mary isn't from around here, I figured I'd suggest it."

"*Petunia* has come here?" Severus asked skeptically. The noisy, wild atmosphere seemed to be the last place Severus would imagine prim and proper Petunia visiting.

Having to shout over the music, Lily said, "I don't know; I'd have to ask her for more details next time I see her!"

Severus couldn't help but grin. He tried to envision Petunia with her nose pierced and her hair dyed pink like one of the girls who was dancing rather suggestively with a bloke in a leather jacket. He then thought of Sirius with Petunia and snorted.

"What's so funny?" Lily asked.

"Nothing," Severus replied. "Let's find a seat."

In the midst of the crowd, they looked for Mary and James, but they hadn't yet arrived. Lily spotted an empty booth in the corner and guided Severus to it. They crammed into the booth on one side, hoping the other couple would join them shortly.

A waitress came to the table a couple of minutes later. Severus raised an eyebrow at the woman's short skirt and revealing top. She leaned over on the table, her breasts far too close to Severus for his liking.

"Good evening," she practically slurred, gazing only at Severus. "What can I get ya?"

Withdrawing in distaste, Severus turned to Lily, wrapped an arm around her shoulders, asking, "What would you like, my lovely wife?"

Severus glanced at the waitress, seeing the woman's eyes narrow slightly, and she suddenly, appropriately, stood up properly. Severus stifled a laugh.

"Whatever beer you have on tap that's cheapest," Lily stated.

"Likewise," Severus said curtly.

"Right," the waitress replied, pouting. She turned away and headed for the bar.

Lily laughed. "What was that all about?" she asked incredulously.

Rolling his eyes for good measure, Severus shook his head. "She's probably used to trying to impress blokes with her wares."

Just then, James and Mary slid into the booth. "Hey, Lily... Severus," Mary said, waving her hand in front of her face to clear the smoke. "It took a while to find you in this crowd."

"Hi," Lily replied, smiling at her friend. "You just missed a particularly good show."

"Oh?" asked James. "And what might that be?"

Lily motioned toward the waitress, who was returning to the table with their drinks. She placed two mugs of beer on the table. Seeing a new male victim, she leaned on the table, leering at James, who didn't have the decency to resist the waitress's lascivious charm.

"What would a strapping lad like you like to drink?" the waitress inquired sweetly.

Turning red in the face, James stuttered, "Er... what d'you have?"

"Oh, we have a lot of variety," the waitress said softly, smiling suggestively at James. "A handsome, young man like you would only want the best, surely-"

Annoyed at her fiancé's idiocy and the lusty waitress, Mary grabbed James's arm roughly and leaned across him. "We'll be just fine with what our friends are having, thank you," she stated pointedly.

The waitress seemed amused by Mary's tone and winked at James. "I'll be right back."

Leaving the table in peace briefly, the waitress went to retrieve more drinks.

"What are you doing, James?" Mary scoffed. "Really, we're not in school anymore."

"I'm... er, sorry, Mary," James apologized pathetically. "It's just... a bloke can't help it." Looking across the table at Severus, probably because he was the only other guy there, he asked, "Right, Snape... Severus?"

"Speak for yourself, Potter," Severus replied smoothly. "I so happen to have the perfect woman already." He smirked triumphantly at his old nemesis.

Not wishing for an argument to break out, Lily cut in, "Well, now that that's out of the way, how've you been? Did you set a date yet?"

"We're thinking in the autumn sometime," Mary said. "Isn't that right, James?"

"What?" James asked, his eyes on the crowd.

Severus looked in the same direction and saw the waitress returning.

Mary elbowed James in the ribs just as the waitress returned with their drinks.

"Oh... right," James said stupidly. "Yeah... autumn."

"Enjoy," the waitress said, wiggling an eyebrow at James.

Mary scoffed indignantly, and James blushed. Severus wondered if the whole evening was going to be this way and felt his patience

waning. He picked up his mug and took a long swig. Not having much to contribute to the conversation, Severus listened to Mary and Lily talk about wedding planning, and James had the good grace to behave, although he did ask what Severus considered ridiculous questions from time to time.

An hour passed, and Severus felt a little more at ease. He joined in the conversation more, and before long, Mary seemed to warm to him. He awkwardly called her Mary once, but couldn't bring himself to call James anything other than Potter.

The crowd in the pub wasn't thinning as the evening worn on. In fact, more people crammed into the place, the amount of body heat and smoke increasing. Uncomfortable, Severus said, "I think I'm going to go out front for a bit of fresh air. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"I'll join you," James suddenly said, standing.

Severus scowled, but didn't protest. The two young men meandered through the crowd and out on to the front pavement.

James leaned against the brick building and sighed, gazing up at the night sky, then looking at Severus.

"Women," he muttered.

"What about them?" Severus inquired.

"Nothing," James replied, perhaps realizing he wasn't in the company of his mates.

Severus kept his eyes off James and gazed into the street. His keen eyes picked up some movements in the shadows in the alley across the way. His senses heightened, he followed the shapes until they disappeared into the darkness. The alley was too deep to see the end.

"What's the matter?" James asked, watching Severus.

Severus held his hand up to silence the other boy. He waited.

Some rustling came from the alley, but anyone entering the pub was oblivious to the noise. Severus heard a dust bin fall, the clanging echoing through the alley, and someone swore.

"Something's wrong," he uttered, indicating the alley.

James's face was skeptical. "How-"

"It's no coincidence, Potter," Severus whispered, stepping closer to his comrade. "We need to get Lily and Mary. I have a bad feeling."

Popping noises issued forth from the alley, and Severus cursed. From within the pub, screams erupted and all hell broke loose.

Chapter Ninety-Five

Time seemed to slow down. Severus and James stood on the pavement, staring dumbfoundedly toward the pub as the front doors burst open and people began running frantically outside, screaming incoherently in their fear. The two wizards briefly exchanged a look of understanding, their wands already aloft in their hands.

Without another moment of hesitation, expecting the worst, they charged into the pub. A frenzied fray of people met them, as Severus and James were the only people intent on getting *in* the pub. Severus's eyes searched desperately for Lily. He found her in the corner booth with Mary just as they had left them, only both women were standing, their wands at the ready.

A large number of Death Eaters, all clad in black robes and donning white masks, were terrorizing the crowd, subjecting helpless Muggles to the Cruciatus for mere fun, floating others up along the ceiling, all the while taunting and laughing maliciously.

Luckily, the Death Eaters hadn't yet spotted the two wizards and two witches. Severus quickly made his way toward Lily, getting to her being his first priority. James seemed to be thinking likewise. They met their women halfway into the pub.

"What do we do?" Mary asked in a high-pitched voice, clearly the least experienced in the Order.

"You should get to safety, both of you," Severus instructed them. "Get help."

With the frightened cries of the crowd, they weren't overheard.

Lily adamantly shook her head. "No, I'm staying and fighting. We need to do something now, Sev."

Severus glanced over his shoulder at the ensuing chaos and swore. "We can't wait another minute." Seeing two still bodies on the floor, one of them the pink-haired young woman, Severus's chest clenched. They were most likely dead.

"Mary, alert Dumbledore," James said roughly.

Severus and Lily turned away from their friends and began to charge toward the battle, hoping that Mary would listen. Thankfully, a loud pop issued forth a few seconds later, and James was joining them.

"She's going to get help," he stated, his voice rushed.

"Let's do this," Severus said, setting his jaw.

He aimed his wand at the closest Death Eater and Stunned him, which unfortunately alerted the Death Eater's comrades. Three of them briefly stopped torturing their victims and glared at the three teenagers coming toward them.

"Well, look who it is," growled one of the Death Eaters, a burly man.

Lily was lightning quick with her wand as she hit the large one's friend to his right with a Stinging Hex, knocking the man over in pain. James was ready, too, and pointed his wand directly at the big Death Eater, yelling, "Shut up, Rowle!"

Rowle merely laughed and blocked James's attempt.

"Pathetic," Rowle said, his face hidden behind the mask, but Severus was sure the man was jeering at them.

Severus growled, hoping the Muggles who had been in the middle of being tortured a moment ago would try to flee. It would be a mess trying to erase the memories of everyone there, but that wasn't Severus's concern right now.

He wasn't going to give in to the man's remarks. This was a serious fight in the middle of a Muggle pub. This attack was plainly showing that Voldemort was taking the next step, a large step in what he considered the right direction. No longer would only families go missing. Huger catastrophies were already in the mix, but Severus knew things would get far worse before this war was over.

Severus made a slashing motion with his wand, always ready to count on his trusty Sectumsempra. Rowle, taken aback in intense pain, howled, grabbing his upper arm as the blood gushed.

"Well, what are you idiots just standin' around for?!" he bellowed at the other Death Eaters. "Get them! Surely you lot can handle a couple of kids!"

James dashed toward two Death Eaters who didn't seem completely ready and were standing farther away, leaving Lily and Severus to deal with the seven who were closer. Hoping back up would arrive soon, Severus began fiercely duelling with two or three Death Eaters at a time, his skills from his previous life's experience coming into play.

Beside him, Lily fought valiantly. Had Severus not been so engaged in battle, he would have commended her. Sectumsempra seemed to be Severus's best chance at bringing Death Eaters to their knees in agony, but as the next few minutes passed, Severus realized he was losing ground. While the Muggles seemed to have cleared out of the place, that only meant that the Death Eaters could focus targeting two wizards and one witch who were opposing them.

Darting curses from every angle and blocking whatever came at him effectively, Severus was nonetheless tiring from the battle. He was too outnumbered to keep at this rate. He heard James shout something and then fall silent. Lily screamed, watching James collapse, and then came a despicable voice that Severus wished he would never have to hear again.

"Is the poor Mudblood sad that her little friend fell down?" asked a woman's voice in a mock-baby tone.

"Bellatrix," Severus breathed, his face turning in horror at the scene before him.

Scared for Lily's life, Severus had let down his guard, and he felt his wand flying out of his hand a second later, but he momentarily lost his resolve to fight. All around him, Death Eaters had their wands trained on him.

Hearing her name, Bellatrix removed her mask and faced Severus, smiling nastily. "Ah, Snape," she said in a falsely sweet voice. "Yes, we know all about you and your Mudblood lover. The Slytherin who turned traitor, thinking you could best us, did you? Well, it seems you're finally at an end. Say goodbye to your filthy wife, Snape."

"If you dare touch a hair on her head!" Severus threatened, making to charge toward Bellatrix, but Bellatrix simply laughed, watching as the hoast of Death Eaters closed in on Severus.

"Yes, I'm very afraid now," she mocked, pretending to pout.

"Severus, don't do anything stupid!" Lily warned, her voice cracking.

"That's good advice, even for a Mudblood," Bellatrix pointed out amusedly. She paused deliberately, seeming to be waiting for something.

Severus felt his stomach turn to ice and drop out of him.

"No... please..." he croaked, verging on desperation.

Bellatrix continued to smile, and then the unthinkable happened. Out of thin air, Lord Voldemort materialized, his once handsome face leering at Severus.

"It has been quite some time, Snape," Voldemort said in way of greeting. "When we last met, I'm afraid you left rather abruptly and rudely. A shame for you, really... or is it more of a shame for your Mudblood wife?"

Swallowing down disgust and fear, Severus said with more conviction than he probably felt, "Don't call her that."

Coming close to Severus, so close Severus could feel Voldemort's breath hot on his skin, Voldemort whispered, "But that is the truth. I speak nothing but the truth."

"You speak nothing but lies," Severus spat, feeling two Death Eaters grabbing hold of his arms. He knew he was seconds away from being magically bound.

"We shall see," Voldemort hissed, stepping away. He moved fluidly, then closed in on Lily like a snake going for the kill. He roughly grabbed her by the hair and pulled her to him, examining her like she was a piece of rubbish.

"What does trash taste like, Snape?" Voldemort asked. "I shall have to see if it's worth it."

Severus tried pulling away from those who were restraining him as he watched in horror and revulsion as Voldemort brought his thin lips down onto Lily's, kissing her, a twisted representation of sacred love. An inhuman noise came from Severus's throat, and before the Death Eaters could bind him, his adrenaline took over in full force and he pulled away from them, running at Voldemort and tackling him.

"Get your disgusting lips off her, you bastard!" Severus bellowed, trying in vain to pin the other man to the floor.

Stunned, Lily had dropped to the floor herself and watched the scene before her without being able to process what was happening. Voldemort had levitated himself out of Severus's grasp and was livid. His features twisted, aiming his wand at Severus, he hissed, "Avada-"

Severus gazed back at Lily, thinking this was the end. He didn't have a chance to say goodbye, but then a bright flash of dazzling white light came, knocking Voldemort and all his followers to the floor. Albus Dumbledore and many Order members Apparated into the room.

"This ends now, Tom," Dumbledore commanded.

Upon seeing Dumbledore, Voldemort stood tall and sneered at the older man. "You think your side truly has a choice, Dumbledore? Stop fooling yourselves. Submit to me now, and you shall be spared."

Dumbledore gazed back at Voldemort with steely eyes and determination. "I do not think that is an option, Tom, although I would kindly suggest the same for you and your lot. You can stop this now-"

"Never!" Voldemort bellowed, suddenly firing a jet of blue light at Dumbledore, who easily blocked it.

"Then I am afraid we pick up from where we left off," Dumbledore said in a calm voice, although there was a deadly quality to it.

The headmaster of Hogwarts shot a jet of fire at Voldemort, who fought it with water, putting it out. The two highly skilled wizards began facing off, giving Severus a chance to gain his footing and run toward Lily. The Order members were now fighting the Death Eaters, and the numbers were even. Unaware of who was fighting whom, Severus had only one goal in mind. He needed to get to Lily.

He saw Bellatrix duelling with Lily. Lily had taken Dumbledore's entrance to stand and retrieve her wand, but Severus knew Bellatrix was a fierce warrior. Lily was several years her junior, and bright and skilled witch or not, Lily wasn't a match for someone like Bellatrix. Severus wished he had his wand, and hoping against hope, he shouted, "Accio wand!"

Miraculously, Severus felt his wand fly into his palm a couple of seconds later. Whoever had taken it from him must have either dropped it or stuffed it loosely in their robe. Severus savagely hoped the Death Eater had been taken down.

He aimed his wand at Bellatrix and shot a nonverbal Disarming Spell at her, his number one desire to render her defenseless. Caught off guard, Bellatrix's wand flew out of her hand, and she whipped her head around to glare at Severus.

"Snape!" she shouted angrily.

Severus slashed his wand through the air, his trademark beauty of a spell ripping open her forearm right at the Dark Mark. The witch fell to her knees in agony, and Lily stood over her, glowering at the other woman hatefully.

Then Lily did something that stunned Severus. She bellowed, "Sectumsempra!" and Bellatrix's shoulder split open, bleeding profusely. She screamed in her extreme pain and glared daggers at Lily.

"You Mudblood bitch-" Bellatrix started to say, but Lily was ruthless. She mimicked her earlier motion, cutting Bellatrix right at the mouth, leaving the foul woman choking on her own blood.

Severus reached Lily and took her hand, ignoring the writhing woman on the floor. "Are you okay?" he demanded frantically.

"Y-yes," Lily panted. "Are you-"

Lily didn't have a chance to finish her sentence. Someone meaning nothing but harm for Lily had shot her in the back with a strong spell, something that Severus couldn't immediately identify. In less than a second, Lily crumpled to the floor. One moment, her vivid green eyes had been gazing into Severus's black ones, and the next moment, she was on the floor, her eyes staring ahead, but not registering a thing.

With a roar, Severus turned to face the Death Eater who had injured his beloved wife. Had the jet of light been green, Severus would have feared the worst, assuming Lily to be dead, but he knew that was not the case... not yet. He wished he could get her to safety, but people were in the middle of a full-on battle, jets of light flying in all directions.

Severus literally threw himself at the man, ripping off his mask. The Death Eater hadn't expected Severus to move so fast. Upon seeing the face under the mask, Severus realized why this man had potentially mortally wounded Lily. It was Rodolphus Lestrangle, Bellatrix's husband.

Pinning Lestrangle to the floor, Severus held his hand roughly against the man's neck, jabbing his wand into Lestrangle's Adam's Apple.

"Give me a reason, I beg you," Severus hissed, fully intent on killing the man.

Lestrangle struggled, then choked out, "The Mudblood deserved it. What she did to my wife-"

"You know *nothing* about love, nothing!" Severus yelled at the man. "Don't even try to compare!"

Severus was beside himself in his misery. He needed to finish this. Suddenly, he felt a hand grabbing him by the shoulder.

"Severus, don't," said a calm voice.

"Get away from me, Longbottom," Severus growled, refusing to look up.

"Don't become a killer like him," Frank stressed. "You're better than that, Severus. Think of... of what Lily would want."

"Don't talk about Lily like she's- like she's-" *Dead*.

Severus couldn't bring himself to say the word. He wouldn't. Instead, with a feral growl, he cast a Full Body Bind on LeStrange and stood, kicking him hard in the gut, then stepped on his nose, breaking it.

Severus noticed a few Death Eaters down, and others had apparently Disappeared.

"Fools! Cowards! Bloody useless idiots!" Voldemort was crying at his followers in between shots with Dumbledore.

"Give up now, Tom!" demanded Dumbledore. "Your side is losing. How many more Death Eaters will the Ministry be claiming tonight?"

Dumbledore's words seemed to strike Voldemort, who glanced around quickly, noticing just how outnumbered his followers were. With a loud hiss, Voldemort turned in place, Disapparating, surrendering to the facts.

The two Death Eaters who remained in battle, seeing that their leader had abandoned them, seemed to lose their resolve and Disappeared as well.

Severus was at Lily's side, checking for a pulse. It was there, although weak, but steady. He sighed quietly in relief, but tenderly took her in his arms, the tears threatening just behind his eyes.

He didn't notice Mary as she helped James stand up. He didn't see Mad-Eye Moody preparing the bound Death Eaters for Azkaban. He

didn't notice that Bellatrix had managed to escape. He didn't pay the least bit of attention to the Order members as they asked each other if they were all right. Severus certainly didn't expect Dumbledore to approach him.

"Severus," the headmaster uttered gently, placing an gnarled hand on the young man's shoulder, "is she-?"

"She's alive," Severus said softly, his shoulders slumped. He didn't care that Dumbledore was touching him. Without Lily, he felt he was nothing. "She needs help," he croaked.

"St. Mungo's, surely-" Dumbledore started to say, but Severus interrupted him harshly.

"No. Whatever Lestrage hit her with, it was Dark Magic. St. Mungo's will not be able to help her. I- I think... I *know* I can find a cure. I will need facilities-"

"You may bring her to Hogwarts," Dumbledore invited. "You will have access to whatever you need. She will have the privacy she needs there, as will you."

Despite their rocky past, Severus breathed, "Thank you."

Holding Lily in his arms, Severus stood. Had she been anyone else, he would have levitated her, but he wasn't going to let her go.

"I will take you. You are tired," Dumbledore said. "Just a moment..."

Dumbledore briefly stepped away, giving instructions to Mad-Eye and the other Aurors. James appeared no worse for the wear now, and Mary and he watched silently, Mary's eyes glassy, as Severus held Lily to his chest.

Dumbledore returned to him a moment later, and placing a hand on Severus's arm, they Disapparated to Hogwarts.

Chapter Ninety-Six

Next thing he knew, Severus was standing just outside the gates to Hogwarts, the wind cold on his face as he stared ahead at the spires and towers he hadn't seen in nearly a year. He felt Dumbledore gently releasing his hold on him and go to the gates to unlock them. Still holding Lily closely, Severus followed the old man, putting one step in front of the other with a determination that he didn't realize he possessed.

The ground was hard beneath his feet, still frozen from the ebbing winter. Although no snow blanketed the dark grounds of Hogwarts, the landscape was still barren and bleak. Severus couldn't appreciate any of it right now, though. His mind was on one task and one task only.

Within a few minutes, they entered the familiar castle, but not through the main doors. Realizing students would still be up and about at this hour, Severus hoped to avoid as many glances as possible. Dumbledore seemed to understand this, for he beckoned for Severus to follow him as he approached a portrait of a Healer from the sixteenth century. Dumbledore's lips moved, and the portrait swung open, much in the manner of the Fat Lady, revealing a hidden tunnel.

"This will take us directly to the infirmary," Dumbledore explained. "After you, Severus."

Severus didn't say a thing. Instead, he entered the passageway and continued up a set of stairs to the infirmary. He stepped out from behind another portrait, evidently the same one he had seen many times during his stays there. The Healers in the painting gazed curiously upon Severus and the girl he held in his arms. He approached the nearest bed, and just as Dumbledore was stepping into the room behind him, Madam Pomfrey came bustling out of her office, alarm on her face.

"What's going on?" she demanded. "I thought I heard the portrait to the secret passageway closing-"

Then her eyes settled on Severus and Lily's prone form on the bed. Fear clutching her, she immediately moved to Lily's side, waving her wand over her.

"S-Severus?" she sputtered. "What happened?"

When Severus didn't respond, she turned to Dumbledore. "Albus, what's going on here? What has happened to this girl?"

Madam Pomfrey's frown deepened as she surveyed Lily with her wand. "From my initial diagnosis, I am unable to detect what she was hit with. I'm assuming she was cursed by a Death Eater? Dark Magic?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, Poppy. It is an unknown curse."

"Is there any way of finding out?" Madam Pomfrey asked, glancing worriedly between Lily and the two men.

"There is indeed," Severus suddenly spoke, his voice rough and worn. "The bastard who hit her is now in custody at the Ministry of Magic. Rodolphus Lestrage. I will use Veritaserum on him. Get a straight answer."

"Severus, you cannot just stroll into the Ministry and demand such a thing," Dumbledore tried to reason.

"I don't care what the Ministry allows or not," Severus growled, standing to his full height from his previous kneeling position at Lily's bedside. "She's my wife! I love her! If Lestrage has information that can save her, I'm bloody well going to get it! You can't sit there and tell me that the Ministry would deny a request to help an innocent victim of You-Know-Who's crimes!"

Severus's hands were balled into fists. He was enraged and glowering deeply at Dumbledore.

"Do calm yourself, Severus," Dumbledore gently admonished. "I am not saying we cannot get such information, but simply that *you* cannot simply go into the Ministry and administer Veritaserum to Lestrage. I will make the necessary arrangements-"

"Now," Severus interrupted, booking no room for argument.

"Very well," Dumbledore replied. "I will go to the privacy of my office and notify the Minister. I will return shortly."

If it wouldn't mean leaving Lily's side, Severus would have followed the headmaster, wanting to know any details as soon as possible, but realizing he had to let some of the responsibility fall on others, and hating it immensely, Severus gave a jerky nod and sat in the chair next to Lily. He watched as Dumbledore exited, the doors closing behind him.

Feeling deflated, Severus sighed and buried his face in his hand. With the other, he took Lily's hand in his. A moment later, he felt a gentle pressure on his shoulder and looked up to see Madam Pomfrey standing over him like a concerned grandmother.

"We will find a way to cure her, Severus," she said softly.

His earlier resolve broken, all Severus could do was nod wordlessly. He felt the incessant prickle of tears at the corners of his eyes, but couldn't force them back this time.

"I had hoped-" he started to say, unable to finish as emotion gripped him.

Madam Pomfrey's hand didn't leave its spot on Severus's shoulder the whole time. She gave him another gentle squeeze there, and then the pressure was relieved. The next thing Severus knew, Madam Pomfrey had summoned a chair to his side and was seated in it.

"You had hoped," she murmured, "and you will continue to hope, Severus. There is always hope. Do not give up now."

He nodded absently. "And... is she- ? Lily, is she stable? Could you tell?"

Severus brought his own wand up, about to perform a diagnostic spell on his wife, as he had been too caught up in his emotions a few minutes earlier to check for himself. Madam Pomfrey, however, stilled his hand with hers.

"Yes," she whispered, "she is stable. Help me administer a Nutritive Potion to her, though. She will be weakened as it is. We will keep a close eye on her, monitoring her hourly, until she is cured."

The mediwitch left for a minute and returned with a small vial. She offered it to Severus. "Would you like to give it to her?"

Severus gingerly took the vial and uncorked it. He magicked the liquid into Lily's stomach.

Just as Severus was about to sit again, the doors to the infirmary opened. Both Madam Pomfrey and Severus's eyes were drawn to the figure of Albus Dumbledore as he entered the room.

"Well?" Severus asked without preamble, anxious and impatient for an answer.

"Alastor has made the arrangements. While the Minister preferred to wait until the morning, I stressed the importance of a life in danger. You may come with me to the Ministry, Severus, and we shall witness Lestranger's confession."

"Good," Severus replied shortly, purposefully putting his walls back in place now that the headmaster had returned. He turned to Lily, leaned over, and brushed his lips over hers. "Keep her safe," he murmured to Madam Pomfrey without meeting her eyes.

"I will," the matron returned kindly. "Go, my boy."

Severus left the infirmary with Dumbledore. As he walked alongside the headmaster, Severus wondered what favor Dumbledore would ask of him for all this assistance. He inwardly shuddered at having to face the man one-on-one, as he was sure Dumbledore would require before everything was through.

"How is Lily?" Dumbledore inquired.

"She is the same," Severus muttered darkly. "There has been no change."

They strolled through the halls in silence, and by this time, the corridors were thankfully empty of students. Upon reaching the headmaster's office, Dumbledore spoke again, "You are doing what you can, Severus. There is no shame in that."

"Who said anything about shame?" Severus shot back harshly, then almost instantly regretted his tone. His shoulders slightly slumped, he said, "Let's just get this over with."

Together, they Flooed to the Ministry. Severus followed Dumbledore to the lift, and they took it to the correct level. When they reached the area where prisoners were held before they were carted off to Azkaban, Dumbledore was greeted by Moody, whose normally rigid face flashed the smallest amount of sympathy in Severus's direction. Thankfully, the Auror had enough tact not to say anything. Moody beckoned them to follow him, and they turned a corner and walked down a long corridor, finally stopping at one of the many doors.

"He's in there," Moody said. "He's restrained. Once we enter, I will administer the Veritaserum, and he will be questioned." Looking at Severus, Moody asked, "Would you like to do the honors?"

Grateful for Moody's understanding, Severus nodded. "Yes, I would. Th-thank you," he murmured.

With a grunt, Moody turned his attention back to the door. He unlocked and unwarded the door, and the three of them stepped into the holding cell. The room was tiny, perhaps only two meters by two meters. They barely could fit.

Lestrangle was bound with ropes and metal cuffs to a chair, and his mouth was spelled shut. Moody roughly grabbed the man by his cheeks and forced his mouth open. He poured the Veritaserum down the man's throat, and Lestrangle swallowed on instinct, since his mouth was once again spelled shut.

"What's your name?" Moody asked, releasing the spell on Lestrangle's mouth.

"Rodolphus Lestrangle," Lestrangle replied in a dull, emotionless voice. His eyes stared straight ahead.

"Are you a Death Eater?" Moody questioned.

"Yes."

Satisfied that the Truth Serum was doing its job, Moody motioned toward Severus to take over.

"What curse did you use on Lily Evans Snape?" Severus asked acerbically.

"The Catatonia Curse," Lestrage bit out, struggling as if he didn't want to reply.

"And what is the cure?" Severus demanded, leaning closer to the hateful man.

"I don't know," Lestrage admitted.

Severus swore under his breath. It was a long shot, but Severus had hoped the Death Eater might know the cure and thus save him a lot of time.

"That's all I wish to ask him," Severus said, taking a step back.

"Very well," Moody said.

They exited the small room, leaving Lestrage to his fate.

"Thank you for your help, Alastor," Dumbledore told his friend.

"Anytime, Albus," Moody replied, nodding at him and then at Severus in turn. "I'll see you out."

Five minutes later, Severus was standing back in the headmaster's office. Dumbledore took a seat behind his desk, looking weary.

"The hour grows late, Severus. You ought to go to sleep. I have already arranged a room for you in the guest wing, complete with Floo access to the private Potions laboratory. Horace already knows you will be utilizing it, and he will leave you in peace. You may use whatever you wish and take as long as you need. The library is, of

course, open to you as well. For now, however, my boy, I strongly suggest you get some sleep."

"I'm not tired," Severus tried to argue, but then his body betrayed him with a yawn.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Dumbledore smiled, gazing at Severus over his half-moon spectacles. "Ah, but something tells me you are indeed *quite* tired, Severus. Go to bed. Your mind will not be any good to you in this condition."

Severus was about to argue further, but decided against it. Thinking of Lily back in the infirmary, he muttered, "Good night, sir," and left the headmaster's office. Instead of heading for the guest quarters, Severus returned to the infirmary. Maybe he wasn't in any condition to be brewing a potion right now, but that didn't mean he couldn't sit with Lily.

When he entered the infirmary, he found it darkened. Madam Pomfrey's door to her office was slightly ajar, but Severus figured the mediwitch was probably getting an hour of sleep in before she checked on her patient. Severus resumed his position at Lily's side. Taking her hand in his again, he whispered, "Trust me, Lily. You're going to be okay."

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Severus opened his eyes and groaned, feeling a stiff and sore neck, and wincing at the bright sunlight pouring in through the window. For a brief moment, he thought he must have foolishly fallen asleep downstairs in the sitting room of Spinner's End, but when he came to his senses, he gazed down at Lily, everything rushing back to him in one painful burst.

"Ah, you're awake," he heard Madam Pomfrey saying. She was at his side then, adding, "Not a change in her, although that's a mixed bag. She hasn't gotten any worse. Did you find out what she was hit with?"

"The Catatonia Curse," Severus rasped, his throat dry.

Madam Pomfrey conjured a glass and then muttered, "Augamenti," filling it with water and passing it off to Severus, who drank it greedily.

"Thank you," he said.

"You ought to eat breakfast and at least take a shower," Madam Pomfrey clucked. "Look at yourself, Severus! I can understand your desire to stay by Lily's side over the night, but you're in no condition to be doing much of anything like that."

Severus frowned, but knew the woman meant well. Although his sleep had been disrupted and shallow, Severus felt some sense coming to him that hadn't existed the night before.

"You'll keep an eye on her?" Severus asked.

"Of course, Severus. Go, take care of yourself. Lily isn't going anywhere."

Reluctantly, Severus stood, stretching in the process. He gently brushed a lock of Lily's hair off her forehead and kissed the spot.

"I'll be back soon, Lily."

Severus found the guest room Dumbledore had given him and shrugged out of his day old clothes. He was soon under the welcoming spray of the shower. A quick shaving charm and a drying charm, and he was done cleaning himself. He found the wardrobe already stocked with black robes, for which Severus was grateful. Satisfied and refreshed, he Flooed to the private Potions laboratory and was ready to get to work on an antidote to Lily's condition.

His stomach growled, and Severus scowled, calling for a house-elf. The creature returned five minutes later with a cup of black coffee and too much food for Severus's liking. He managed to down the coffee and eat two pieces of toast, leaving the other sugary and greasy bits of food untouched.

Severus placed a cauldron on the bench over where the fire would be lit. He surveyed the shelves and began pulling down what would seem like random ingredients to an onlooker. He had the basics for a

typical antidote to a Dark Magic curse and would begin there. The morning passed, and Severus kept himself holed up in the room, never once disturbed. He picked at the remaining breakfast food and refilled his cup with coffee for lunch and then resumed work on the potion. By four o'clock, he had a basic healing potion prepared.

From here, things would be more challenging. He would need to visit the library and begin searching for more information. Antidotes to Dark Magic was a highly unknown and little studied realm. Sighing, Severus left the Potions lab and returned to his temporary room. He then made a quick visit to the infirmary to check in on Lily. Relieved that she hadn't gotten any worse, he made his way to the library, wishing the students weren't gaping at him as he walked the halls.

Every so often, one of the former students whom he had taught in the duelling lessons would see him and smile, offering a hello. He was met with curious gazes as well, but Severus didn't elaborate. Upon reaching the library, he went for the Restricted Section, glad he was no longer a student who needed permission.

Severus spent the remainder of the day pouring through numerous volumes on Dark Magic and cures and antidotes. He made notes along the way and finally decided to take some of the books back to his room with him.

Most of the books sat on the desk in his room, but he took one with him when he went to visit Lily again. Severus tried to make conversation with her, even though he knew it was foolish.

"All these books on the Dark Arts, Lily, and would you believe..." he trailed off, then finished his train of thought in his head *...still nothing on what You-Know-Who could be using to make himself invincible.*

Severus could feel his eyelids growing heavy. He had been seeking information for Lily's cure, first and foremost, but Severus also tried to keep his eyes peeled for anything that Voldemort could be using to protect his miserable life.

Then his black eyes roamed across a passage that made him stop reading. He reread it. One word stuck out.

Horcrux.

Severus nearly dropped the book.

"Holy shit," he muttered, turning the book over to see its title.

Secrets of the Darkest Art.

In spite of the situation, Severus smiled. "Lily, I think we may have the answer... well, one answer."

This smile faded as he realized he still needed an answer to her condition's cure.

x x x x x

Because his body couldn't take another night sitting in a chair sleeping, Severus returned to his room to catch what few hours of restless slumber he was afforded. He left the bed a couple of hours before dawn, quickly showering and changing. He repeated his previous day's routine of going to the lab and working, drinking his coffee black and eating next to nothing.

Severus whiled away an entire day working on the antidote, hoping against hope that he was on to something. He couldn't spare a thought about the meddling headmaster, but knew in the back of his mind that Dumbledore was patiently waiting up in his office for Severus to come to him.

In between spending time with Lily and working on the potion, Severus was unable to give much more attention to Horcruxes and what to do next regarding Voldemort. All that mattered now was Lily's cure.

After the second day drew to a close, Severus felt he was several steps closer. The third day proved to be the day of reckoning. Once evening came, Severus poured the contents of the cauldron into a flask and carried it carefully, like a sacred relic, to the infirmary.

"Is that it?" Madam Pomfrey inquired, her voice full of anticipation.

"I hope so," Severus said, bracing himself.

"Shall I call the headmaster?"

"What ever for?" Severus asked curtly. Sighing, he amended, "My apologies, Poppy. It's been a rough couple of days, but no, do not call for Dumbledore."

"Very well. I'll let you be at it, then." She stepped back, giving Severus his space.

Severus briefly closed his eyes and inhaled. Opening them, he uncorked the flask and magicked the antidote into Lily's stomach. He watched, tense and unmoving. Then, after a few minutes, some color returned to her cheeks, and he opened her eye, checking for signs of life. Lily's eye jittered back and forth as if she were in REM sleep. He noticed her muscles seemed to relax.

Slumping into the chair, Severus heaved a great sigh of relief.

Smiling, Madam Pomfrey observed, "It's working. Severus, you're brilliant."

"Yes, it's working," Severus echoed, almost in a state of disbelief.

He stayed by Lily's side until she opened her eyes. Her green orbs found Severus's black ones, and they held each other's gazes for a long time. Finally, Lily smiled weakly, and Severus grasped her hand all the more.

"What happened?" she rasped.

Severus's face broke into a smile. "It doesn't matter right now, Lily. What matters..." he choked, a rebel tear leaking out, "...what matters is that you're going to be okay."

"Sev... you're crying."

Kissing her softly on the lips, Severus whispered into her ear, "These are happy tears, love."

uAuthor's Note/u Well, I hope you're happy! She's okay! I couldn't leave you with another cliffie, not after being so evil for the past several chapters. I needed to get this one done today because I'm going out of town tomorrow through Sunday, so don't expect any updates for about a week.

Next chapter: Dumbledore and Severus finally talk. You finally find out what memory Dumbledore saw in Lily's mind.

See? Aren't I nice? I gave you a little preview!

Finally, a big thank you to all of my readers/reviewers! This is a really long, complicated story, but it's been a labor of love for me. I've still got a long way to go, so I hope I don't bore you. I hope to keep things interesting to the very end. Did I tell you this story has a happy ending? Because, well, yes, it does.

Chapter Ninety-Seven

Severus remained at Lily's bedside well into the night. When sleep finally claimed her, he watched, a calm expression on his face, as her eyes drifted shut, and her breathing was soft and peaceful.

Madam Pomfrey joined Severus, but he kept his eyes on Lily, hoping to continue to see an improvement in her condition. As the matron's robes rustled at Severus's side, he heard her speak.

"She is doing well."

Nodding, Severus murmured, "Yes." He reached with a couple of fingers and brushed them across Lily's forehead, feeling her temperature. "She's still weak, but she will recover fully in a few days."

"Until then, you ought to get some sleep, Severus," Madam Pomfrey gently admonished.

"I will. Just give me a few more minutes," Severus replied, not taking his eyes off Lily.

Truth be told, he was afraid to leave her. Severus had already explained everything to Lily: from being struck with the Catatonia Curse by Lestrangle to taking three days to find the cure. He had remained silent about the Horcruxes, however.

Madam Pomfrey left without another word, allowing Severus's mind to whirl about in hopes of what to do regarding the Horcruxes. Hindsight was truly a valuable thing, Severus now realized. He had so many pieces to the puzzle before, but he simply hadn't known exactly *how* Voldemort had kept himself alive.

Of course, the Dark Lord had boasted to his faithful followers on several occasions that he had taken certain precautions to protect himself against death, but he had never revealed his secrets.

All the professors knew of Tom Riddle's diary and how it had possessed Ginny Weasley, feeding off her life force. The incident in the Chamber of Secrets couldn't be easily ignored. Severus clearly

remembered seeing the Sword of Gryffindor lying next to a destroyed ring, the very ring which had blackened Dumbledore's hand. Most glaringly obvious now was Harry Potter himself. Dumbledore hadn't actually told Severus that Harry had been a Horcrux, but he might as well have. At the time, Severus had thought a part of Voldemort's soul had merely latched itself onto Harry accidentally. Because of Dumbledore's refusal to be completely honest with him, Severus had never known the whole story, had never seen the entire picture... until now.

Staring at Lily, Severus wondered if the Sword of Gryffindor held the power to destroy Horcruxes. *That* had been why Dumbledore had requested - no, practically demanded - even after death, that Severus obey him and deliver the sword to Harry Potter.

But if Potter had needed the sword while he was roaming the countryside, then surely that would mean the Dark Lord had had additional Horcruxes besides just the ring and the diary.

This realization struck Severus, and his earlier feeling of triumph at having finally figured out the truth about Voldemort's attempt at invincibility dissipated. The gravity of the situation didn't surprise Severus, however. He knew how afraid Voldemort was of death. Surely he would have been preparing his protection for years before he even attempted the attack on the Potters. But how many Horcruxes did the evil bastard have, and what were they all?

Severus sighed.

That's what Dumbledore was sharing with Potter during his final year at Hogwarts... information he never felt he could trust to share with me, Severus thought bitterly.

At the moment, one of the figures who was in his thoughts entered the infirmary. Dumbledore immediately took notice of Severus and walked toward him.

"Madam Pomfrey told me you were successful in curing Lily," Dumbledore stated quietly.

Severus gave a stiff nod.

Against Severus's unspoken wishes, Dumbledore pulled a chair up next to the young man and sat.

"You have done well, my boy," Dumbledore went on to say. "Even for you, Severus, I must admit - I am impressed."

"What do you really want, sir?" Severus asked without preamble, his voice wary and worn.

"There is, actually, something I've been meaning to discuss with you, Severus, but I believe it would be best if we were in the privacy of my office."

"Why should I go with you?" Severus questioned, now irritated. "Whatever it is, surely it can wait-"

"You know as well as I do that this has gone undiscussed long enough," Dumbledore said sternly.

Had Severus been a child, he maybe would have squirmed under the headmaster's scrutiny, but instead, his shields only went up further.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Severus lied, looking Dumbledore directly in the eyes, daring him to try and read his mind.

Severus felt a brief nudge at his mind, but then Dumbledore sighed, diverting his blue-eyed gaze. "What is it, Severus? Fear? You have done so much good for the Order and for Lily... for me as well, even though you are loathe to admit it. How much longer will we play this game?"

"I never said it was a game, sir," Severus replied smoothly.

"Perhaps it is time we worked together more instead of separately," Dumbledore continued, but Severus knew the old man was trying to break him, trying to flatter him into submission.

Severus glanced at Lily and recalled the day Dumbledore had tried to read her mind. While Dumbledore had always been intuitive and shrewd, Severus was beginning to wonder if the aged wizard truly

knew more than he was letting on. At that thought, Severus felt his insides go cold.

"You must promise to leave Lily out of this," Severus stated.

"As you wish," Dumbledore replied. "Shall we, then?"

Severus stood, his face an impassive mask to hide all the different emotions just beneath the surface. A part of him wished to simply take Lily and run and get as far away from the old man as possible, but Severus knew he was already in too deep. He was too far involved in the war to turn away now. Besides, the last thing he was was a coward.

Severus followed Dumbledore through the empty corridors, his mind turning in all directions. How long had Dumbledore known? It was true that Severus thought that Dumbledore had suspected something, but now that the moment was here, revealing the truth was not something Severus wished to do at all. Telling Lily, the woman he loved, had been the exception. No one else needed to know his secrets.

Once they reached the headmaster's office and were seated, Dumbledore watched Severus from across his desk. Severus wondered why the headmaster was deliberating.

"We're here," Severus said softly. "What is it you've been burning to ask me, Dumbledore? I told you this isn't a game, yet you seem to relish in making it so. Let me make myself plain right now, sir. I will not indulge your twisted desire at being the master of the chessboard."

"You seem to have had a rather negative image of me for some time, Severus," Dumbledore said mildly. "Have I done something to insult you?"

Severus would have hoped this question was Dumbledore's reason for calling him up here, that what needed to be discussed so desperately was a misunderstanding at best or a difference in views at worst, but Severus wasn't going to be taken by any of Dumbledore's antics.

"That is not what this is about," Severus stated. "Ask your question, Dumbledore."

"Very well."

Severus expected the headmaster's bearded lips to move, but they remained still. Instead, Dumbledore waved his hands as if summoning something. Severus heard the cupboard behind him open and watched as the Pensieve drifted out and landed on the headmaster's desk. Dumbledore proceeded to bring his wand to his temple and withdraw a silvery strand of memory and place it into the Pensieve.

"Take a look," Dumbledore offered, as if he were showing Severus a new curio.

Severus stood from his chair and gazed down into the contents of the Pensieve. He didn't need to enter them to see clearly what the memory contained, for it was only a single memory, not a plethora that would obscure the image by merely looking down on it from the outside. What he observed almost made his heart stop for a second time.

What he witnessed in the memory was his heart stopping.

His death.

Unable to keep the natural and instantaneous shock from showing, Severus recoiled from the Pensieve and immediately grew defensive.

"How *dare* you invade Lily's mind like that," Severus hissed. "You had no right, no right-"

Dumbledore held up a hand to silence his young comrade. "Severus, please... sit."

"Why should I do anything you say?" Severus implored, narrowing his eyes at the old man. "There is nothing left to say."

With that, Severus turned and went for the exit. Upon reaching it, however, he found that he was locked in.

Not bothering to look at Dumbledore, Severus nearly whispered, "Let me out." His voice was low and menacing.

"I do not think that would be prudent, Severus."

Severus reached for his wand, unsure of what he would do with it.

"You do not want to do that, Severus," Dumbledore said in a far too placid tone. "From what I have seen in this memory, it would seem obvious what is going on here. I must say, I am surprised that such a thing is even possible, but history has recorded rare cases where it was believed a man was reliving his life... although without a Pensieve, it was difficult to tell in the past."

"Do not pretend to understand anything about me," Severus hissed, now fully turning around and glowering heavily at Dumbledore, who remained nonplussed. "Raising my wand at you now wouldn't be the first time."

Severus kept every wall firmly in place. The rational part of him wasn't sure why he had just said what he had, but his emotions were falling quickly out of check. Still, he wouldn't let Dumbledore see into his mind. He just wouldn't.

When Dumbledore didn't speak, Severus said again, "Let me out."

"I have known for some time now, Severus, so an explanation is not truly necessary. It is obvious to me now, after all, that you are, in fact, reliving your life. I had my suspicions about you starting about three years ago. You made a large shift in your life. Just as you were nearly fully immersed in the Dark Arts and befriending future Death Eaters, you suddenly made a remarkable change toward the side of Light. You not only changed your values, it would seem, but you surely recall how you helped several other students during your final year by preparing them for battle. You were proving yourself to be a strong ally, although why you wouldn't warm to me, I did not understand. I am left to assume that something unfortunate must have passed between us in another life. I should like to know what it was, Severus, so that I might not make the same mistake again."

When Dumbledore finished speaking, his words were tired and heavy. While the headmaster had been uttering his sentiments, Severus had turned away again. He felt his shoulders marginally dropping. He was exhausted from the past few days, both mentally and physically, and was finding it difficult to keep his resolve much longer. Severus hated himself for letting his guard down, but as he revolved to face Dumbledore, he purposefully kept his eyes on the floor.

"How can you demand I tell you anything when you have been trying to sneak into my mind and my wife's mind like a thief? How can I trust you? You- you *claimed* to have trusted me before... in my other life, that is, but in the end, I saw you for what you were. You were the grand master, the puppeteer who plays with his pieces and puts them all in a row, just as you would want them. You never told me the truth before, and when you did reveal most of it, it was too late and still full of lies. You had lied to me for years. You used me. You didn't care a whit about me. All you cared about was achieving your goal. I was nothing but another means to an end for you."

Your end.

"Then help me to understand better, Severus. You aren't giving me much to work with, but if I knew, as I told you, perhaps we could set it right now and avoid it happening again... whatever was so horrible that you are refusing to tell me."

Dumbledore's voice was soothing, almost gentle, and to most, his hypnotic tone would have worked, but just as Dumbledore thought Severus was relaxing, the young man flinched as if struck and glared at him.

"I trusted you!" Severus yelled. "I thought you at least trusted me, too! I put everything I had in your bloody trust, but I was never to be anything to you other than a tool for you to use! I'm not making the same mistake again. I can take care of Lily and myself without your help. I saved her, not you! At least this time I was able to do something about it!"

The words had already left Severus's mouth before he realized what he had spoken. Dumbledore gazed upon him with sorrow, now beginning to understand better the man in front of him.

"What happened to Lily, Severus?"

"Don't talk about Lily!" Severus bellowed. "I told you to leave her out of this! Now, let me go with the last shred of my dignity-"

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. "You lost her, didn't you?" he asked quietly. "You were friends with the wrong crowd and followed down the path many of them took, and your friendship with Lily was tragically ended. But that is not all, is it, Severus? She died in the war, didn't she?"

Severus hated how Dumbledore could figure things out with so little to go on. Completely enraged and having no control over himself, Severus raised his wand and shattered all of Dumbledore's trinkets in one motion.

"I TOLD YOU NOT TO TALK ABOUT LILY!" he screamed. "YOU KNOW NOTHING! NOTHING!"

"Severus!" Dumbledore called, trying to get the young wizard's attention. "Calm yourself!"

"Why should I?" Severus demanded. "You've made me your prisoner-"

"Severus, I am sorry," Dumbledore implored. "I am even sorry for my sins from another life, things I haven't even done to you in this life. Whatever happened, I should hope you believe me when I say it was never my intention to bring you to harm, to bring you pain."

"That's a load of rubbish," Severus sneered. "When I needed your compassion, your understanding, you used Lily against me. You taunted me with the remembrance of her. You had the audacity to shed a couple of tears years later when you finally believed and realized that I had never once stopped loving her. Did you think so little of me not to trust me all those years? Is it because I was placed in Slytherin? You know what you told me once? 'I sometimes think we Sort too soon.' Was being Sorted into Slytherin not good enough by your golden Gryffindor standards?"

"Severus, surely- What you speak of are not things that have come to pass in my life as I know it. I have already apologized for my counterpart's treatment of you. I'm sorry you looked up to me and that I disappointed you, but, Severus, I am not perfect. Too many people glorify me as some sort of idol to be worshipped and forget that I, too, have faults. Clever and powerful though I am, I was not always so right in my way of thinking... and from what you are saying, it would seem I was not so wise in my eldest years, either."

"No, you weren't," Severus shot back.

Dumbledore sighed deeply. "Nothing can be done about the past, Severus. You have already overcome so much, and without even knowing the details of your other existence, I am sure of this. Am I correct in saying, for example, that you actually used your previous knowledge of events to save the Bones family?"

Severus gave a jerky nod. "Before you even think about recruiting me to be your fortune teller, you should know that things have drastically changed. Even if I did know everything that would happen, why should I confide in you? I don't need your assistance to help the cause for Light."

"But together is better than apart, Severus," Dumbledore argued. "Why did you join the Order of the Phoenix if you believed I were nothing but a grand manipulator? Did you think, perhaps, that in numbers we would be more successful than alone?"

"My reasons are not important. All you need to know is that I wish to see You-Know-Who brought down just as much as you or anyone in the Order."

"That is, indeed, a common goal we share. Is there anything you know that might be of assistance where Voldemort is concerned?"

Severus paused, considering for a minute what to say. He was still trying to figure out how their conversation had gone from him shouting in distrust to speaking almost calmly. As much as Severus was loathe to confide anything in Dumbledore, he knew that the headmaster had been instrumental in finding out important information about the Horcruxes before. Bringing about an end to

Voldemort without Harry Potter in the world was a team effort. Even with Harry, there had been several people involved.

Lily had told him that he didn't need to carry the burden alone of destroying Voldemort. Severus realized anew that he had certain advantages over Dumbledore this time around. He wouldn't need to be so dependent on the man, but telling Dumbledore about the Horcruxes was bigger than a personal problem.

"You-Know-Who is protecting himself from death," Severus stated. "With Horcruxes."

"I see," Dumbledore replied, not seeming too surprised. "I had suspected he would take measures to ensure his protection. Horcruxes, you say? That is a rare and dangerous method, but he has no doubt killed enough people to rip his soul. Do you know what objects he may have used?"

"There is a diary... and a ring." Severus described the items to Dumbledore. "You destroyed the ring with the Sword of Gryffindor, and the diary- it was destroyed by another."

"Who?" Dumbledore asked.

"That doesn't matter," Severus stated, not wishing to get into Harry Potter and the prophecy, as that would lead him back down a bitter and angry path.

Dumbledore sat in his chair, stroking his beard in thought. He was staring ahead at nothing in particular.

Severus noticed the time and would have heard the clock ticking had he not shattered it with all of Dumbledore's other trinkets.

"May I go now?" Severus asked witheringly. "Are you content that you've gotten the truth and thus something else to hold above my head?"

"I will not hold it above your head, Severus. I intend to keep your secret just that: a secret. Should I betray you, you shall have a right to do whatever you wish to me."

Even kill you? he wondered ironically, but Severus wasn't serious. His humor was dark.

"Good night, Severus."

Severus went toward the door and found it unlocked. He turned the knob and stepped onto the stairs.

"It's about bloody time," Severus mumbled. Glaring at Dumbledore, he said with warning in his voice, "You had better not betray my trust, Dumbledore."

Author's Note: It is my belief and interpretation of canon that Severus not only felt betrayed by Dumbledore because Dumbledore revealed the true reason for protecting Harry all those years, but I believe Severus thought of Dumbledore as something of a father figure in his lonely life and therefore felt hurt by his treatment of him (and seeming distrust). Dumbledore was the only other person who he confided anything in besides Lily, even if he had to do it because of his position as a spy. I believe that it is not an over-reaction for Severus to get so defensive in the presence of Dumbledore, as I do not believe Severus would easily forgive or believe Dumbledore in this life after everything that happened already. However, Severus is not foolish enough to think that he can destroy Horcruxes on his own. He hated doing it, but he had to confide some in Dumbledore.

This was a tricky chapter to write, but I wrote it the way I interpret these two characters. I do not hate Dumbledore, for those of you who think I do. I am writing much from Severus's point of view, as always.

Chapter Ninety-Eight

As soon as Severus left the headmaster's office, he wasted no time in putting as much distance between Dumbledore and himself as possible. He didn't want to venture a guess at what time it was, but as the castle sat dark and silent around him, save the soft snores coming from some of the paintings' inhabitants, Severus knew it was absurdly late. Had it been any other night, he would have gone to his room and found what sleep might come to him, but his mind was on one person only.

Lily.

He had to get to her as quickly as possible.

His footsteps frantic, Severus was thankful for his younger body's agility as he made his way to the infirmary. Upon entering the room, Madam Pomfrey was nowhere in sight, and Lily was where he had last left her: sleeping soundly on the cot she had resided in since her arrival at Hogwarts three days earlier.

He sat next to her and brushed the hair back from her face, wishing to see her more clearly. Leaning down, he planted a kiss on her forehead and then placed a hand there, checking her temperature. She was in a deep sleep and didn't stir at his gentle ministrations.

Sighing, Severus realized he would have to wait until morning. Awakenning Lily now and taking her home wouldn't be good for her recovery. She didn't need to suffer any more than she already had. Choosing to remain at her side through the night, Severus took her hand in his and felt sleep finally claiming him.

Several hours later, Severus's eyes drifted open to find the pale, dim light of dawn streaming in through the windows. Realizing he was resting his head on the edge of the mattress, Severus sat up, his neck stiff and sore from the position. Not a couple of seconds after his withdrawal, Lily shifted in the bed and turned toward him, her eyes opening. A sweet, small smile alighted her pretty face when she saw that it was him who was sitting with her.

"Sev," she whispered.

"Good morning, Lily," Severus returned just as softly. "How are you feeling?"

Lily tried to sit up and winced, which in turn caused Severus concern. He moved toward her to help her, but Lily managed on her own.

"I'm fine, Sev... just tired and still disoriented. My body hasn't moved from this bed in, what, three days? I think it's normal to feel a bit stiff."

His face relaxing, Severus replied, "I'm glad to hear it. How do you feel about going home?"

"Home sounds lovely," Lily agreed. "I'm grateful to Dumbledore for allowing us to stay here, but I miss my own bed and our home in general. It would be good to get back to a normal routine again."

Seeing that Severus was now frowning, she asked, "What's the matter?"

"Dumbledore," Severus murmured.

"What happened? Did he do something, say something?"

Even though they were speaking in hushed voices, Severus brought his wand out and muttered, "Muffliato," not wishing to be overheard by anyone, even the portraits.

Leaning in close to Lily, Severus whispered, "Yes, something happened, but I'd rather not discuss it here. That's part of the reason I asked if you were ready to go back to Spinner's End."

Lily searched his eyes and nodded, not saying anything more. Severus, relieved for her silence on the matter, withdrew and was surprised to see Madam Pomfrey standing not more than five feet away.

Severus released the Muffliato spell and turned to face the matron. Before he could say anything, however, Madam Pomfrey inquired, "What's that buzzing noise? Wait... it just ended."

Severus shrugged.

"Hmmm," was all she said. Seeing Lily awake and alert, she smiled. "How are you, Lily?"

"Much better, thank you, Madam Pomfrey," Lily replied graciously. "In fact, Severus and I were thinking of returning home-"

"Returning home?" Madam Pomfrey echoed. Glaring mildly at Severus, she asserted, "But you've just started your recovery! Severus, you're studying at St. Mungo's. Surely you know it's too soon to move a patient-"

"I realize that, Poppy," Severus interrupted, "but I am perfectly capable of taking care of my wife. Besides, she will be more comfortable at home. You have access to our home should you feel the need to visit. You are welcome anytime."

Unlike some people, Severus thought bitterly, referring to Dumbledore.

Madam Pomfrey was uneasy, but she sighed. "Very well," she relented, "but you must promise that you will notify me if anything changes. If it's serious, take her to St. Mungo's, Severus. I will stop by this evening... if that's all right with you."

"That would be great, Madam Pomfrey," Lily stated kindly, offering the older woman a smile.

"All right, then," the matron acquiesced, none too pleased. "In a few hours, I'll be Flooing into your sitting room."

Giving both of the former students a stern gaze, Madam Pomfrey stepped out.

"Let's get you dressed," Severus said. He helped Lily stand and, much to Lily's protestation, assisted her in dressing. Once she was ready, they left through the fireplace and were back in the book-lined sitting room of Spinner's End.

Lily was feeling dizzy from their travel through the Floo Network and nearly fell to the floor, but Severus managed to stop her fall. He steadied her and led her to the sofa, where he joined her.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Just a little dizzy," Lily admitted. "You know how disorienting Floo travel is under normal circumstances."

"I don't think attempting the steps would be a good idea," Severus pointed out. "Do you want to lie down? I can transfigure the sofa into a bed-"

"Sev," Lily said with a weak smile, "I'm not an invalid. Let's discuss what you couldn't at Hogwarts. What did Dumbledore want with you?"

Sighing, Severus ran a hand through his hair and found it greasy, realizing he hadn't showered in two days. Frowning, he explained, "He knows the truth about me, Lily - that I'm reliving my life. He was suspicious for a long time. It just so happens..." Severus trailed off, anger swelling inside him.

Lily took his fretting hands in her own. "What?" she implored. "How did he know? Did you just outright tell him? I can't imagine you would, not after the way he betrayed your trust in the past."

"Exactly," Severus said firmly. "I had no intention of sharing my secrets with him, but the bloody, manipulative fool couldn't keep his nose, or more like his mind, out of other people's affairs. He glimpsed a memory in your mind that day he came to visit, Lily. He saw what you witnessed when I showed you my memories in the Pensieve: my death."

Lily gasped. "Sev, I'm so sorry... I didn't mean for him to see it-"

Severus didn't want Lily to get herself worked up or to blame herself. "No, Lily," he gently admonished, silencing her with a finger to the lips, "it's not your fault, so don't you dare try to claim responsibility for that old man's tricks. He had no right invading your mind like that. You couldn't have been expected to know Occlumency. Your willingness to trust and accept others has always been something I admired about you, and for you to have to close yourself up like I have isn't something I'd wish upon you... even though that's exactly what you've had to do all these months I've been teaching you Occlumency. *I'm* sorry, Lily."

Lily was shaking her head. "I don't understand... I never thought Dumbledore would resort to such tactics. And now that he knows the truth about you, what will he do, Sev?"

"He's not going to do anything... or he had better not," Severus said savagely. "I warned him not to bring you into this, and he promised, for whatever that's worth, to hold to that."

Severus then explained what he had found about Horcruxes and how Voldemort was using them to keep himself alive. He told her about the ring and the diary, and then realized that the snake, Nagini, must have been one as well, based on Dumbledore's request for him to look for Voldemort protecting the animal. Thankfully, Nagini wasn't yet in the Dark Lord's possession. Severus finally explained that Harry Potter had been made into a Horcrux, but again, since he didn't exist here, that was one less Horcrux.

"Unfortunately," Severus was now saying, "we're going to have to work together with Dumbledore if we want to see an end to the Dark Lord. Dumbledore was instrumental last time and will be again. He never told me everything before, but my role is different in this existence. I'm not his spy. He can't use me like he did, and I won't let him. If he dares to try anything, he will pay. I swear it, Lily. He knows as much."

Lily's mouth was hanging open. "Horcruxes? What madness. And Dumbledore, did he... agree to this?"

"Dumbledore told me himself that if he broke his promise to me, I could do whatever I wished to him."

Severus spoke with such conviction and hatred that Lily felt fear, and she realized for perhaps the first time that the man in front of her could be potentially very dangerous if provoked. Seeing his previous life's memories had been revealing enough, but to see and hear the anger in Severus now was startling.

"You wouldn't... kill him, would you?" Lily asked in a small voice.

Hearing Lily's trepidation, Severus released his bitterness and hatred with a long sigh. "No, I won't kill him, Lily. I never wanted to kill him

before, as much as I hated him for asking it of me. Dumbledore may seem like my enemy on some level, but the true enemy is V-Voldemort."

Lily's eyes gaped. "You just spoke his name," she said in awe.

"Yes," Severus murmured. "I was afraid to utter that name for years. I never spoke it until now. He is the one who killed you, Lily, even though it was my fault in the first place. I... I have learned to forgive myself of my past crimes, and so my biggest enemy is no longer myself but Voldemort. His name will no longer inspire fear in me. I cannot allow it. He will be destroyed if I have anything to do about it."

"We will know brighter days, Sev. He cannot live forever, even if he might think he can. If Harry Potter could defeat him, surely you can."

"If not me, then someone," Severus said. "What proves a problem now is locating and destroying the Horcruxes first."

"Do you know how they might be destroyed?"

"Dumbledore used the Sword of Gryffindor on the ring. We have enough information, I believe, to start from."

What Severus didn't yet realize was that the Sword of Gryffindor had been infused with basilisk venom.

Chapter Ninety-Nine

In the days following their return to Spinner's End, Lily continued to recuperate. Severus remained with her as she stayed home from work, but by the third day, Lily had insisted that Severus go back to St. Mungo's, saying she could manage fine on her own for a few hours.

By the end of the week, Lily had returned almost to normal, which included her fiery spirit. Perhaps it was due to the boredom from being confined to the house for so many days, but an unusual amount of anguish had culminated in Lily's normally kind heart.

When Severus returned home from work that day, he found her standing in the kitchen scrubbing dishes, bent over the sink.

"You know, you could use magic to do that," he joked, coming from behind and wrapping his arms around her.

Lily reacted in a way that surprised Severus. Dropping the dish rag and a plate to the floor, the latter of which shattered, Lily viciously whirled around. Water was collecting around the shards, and Severus stepped back, alarmed.

"Lily, what-?"

Balling her hands into fists as her sides, Lily exclaimed, "That bloody, arrogant, sodding-!"

"Lily, what happened?" Severus implored. "Calm down and tell me! Please!"

Lily stormed out of the kitchen and into the sitting room. Severus followed her, at a complete loss as to what could have upset her so much.

She plopped onto the couch in a very uncharacteristic fashion. Severus joined her, keeping a little distance between them.

Reaching tentatively for her arm, Severus asked, "Did something happen while I was gone?" His face darkening, he added lowly, "Did someone visit?" His mind instantly went to Dumbledore.

"No, no one visited," Lily spat. "But it's Dumbledore who I'm pissed at!"

"You're just now realizing what he's done?" Severus asked.

"Well, no..." Lily now grumbled. "I had a whole week to let it sink in."

In spite of the seriousness of her attitude, Severus smiled ruefully. "Lily, now that this realization has suddenly struck you, perhaps you understand better my reasons for not trusting the man all these years?"

"Yes!" Lily exclaimed, standing and throwing her hands up in the air. "Honestly, Severus, how did you do it? How could you *stand* his intrusions? I swear, next time I see him-"

"Next time we see him, we're going to work together with the Order, just like you told me months ago. As much as I am loathe to admit it, we need his help, Lily. Manipulative or not, Dumbledore wishes to bring V-Voldemort down just as much as anybody. I didn't tell him everything, you realize. He has no idea about Harry Potter, for example."

"But how will you explain the prophecy? Won't it all happen all over again, only it'll be about another child? Won't Dumbledore still be the one to hear it?"

"A different child, yes, Lily, not Harry. Dumbledore doesn't need to know everything. Merlin knows he kept enough from me the first time around. I think it's time I returned the favor... gave him a taste of his own medicine." Severus smiled deviously.

Calming, Lily sank back into the sofa and sighed. "I guess... I'll go along with what you're planning, Sev, but only because it's what you want. And to think I thought you should've confided in Dumbledore in the past," she mumbled bitterly.

Bringing an arm around her shoulders, Severus pulled Lily to him. "Enough of this, Lily. Don't beat yourself up. How many times have you given me the same advice? Besides, you're just finished recovering finally. I'd hate to see you relapse."

"I won't relapse," Lily mildly argued.

Severus thought she rather sounded like a child just then, but didn't say so. The last thing he wanted to do was give her another reason to get worked up.

"All right," Severus conceded. "Just... try to keep the bigger picture in mind. You do realize that I'm giving you the same advice you would have given me? It's because of you, Lily, that I'm able to sit here relatively calmly now and tell you these things."

Lily relaxed against her husband's reassuring touch and sighed. "You're right."

Deciding a change of subject was needed, Severus queried (and he couldn't believe he was the one suggesting it), "When are you going to let your friends see you? You've refused visits all week. I daresay Mary is probably especially antsy to see you."

"Tomorrow's Saturday, right?" Lily asked.

"Yes."

"Tomorrow, then. You're right, Sev. I haven't exactly been myself lately."

"But understandably why," Severus pointed out.

"Do you suppose we could, er... have a few more people besides James and Mary over?"

"How many people were you thinking?" Severus inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"I think Petunia and Sirius have been wanting to see each other again, and this would be a convenient setting. And Remus, of course, should be welcome."

Severus scowled at the thought of having so many people in their home. "You certainly seem more like your usual self again," he quipped. "Very well, but you are not to over-tax yourself. I can ensure

the home is clean and make dinner. You are to relax... take a nice, long bath, put on your best dress."

"Sev-" Lily started to argue, but Severus would hear none of it.

"No, Lily. If this is what you want, then I am willing to oblige, but *you* are to take care of yourself." Seeing the disgruntled expression on her pretty face, Severus amended gently, "I only say this because I care about you. You had me worried for a while there when you were under the curse. I will not see you unhappy."

Even though Lily was a strong woman with a fiery temper to rival Severus's brooding moods, she didn't want to push the matter with him this time. He was a man of his word, stern and unwavering, but extremely loyal and true.

"All right," she said, her face easing into a smile, "but promise not to say anything to upset my... our friends."

"I'll think about it," Severus replied, smirking.

x x x x x

The next day, Severus woke with a headache. He wondered if he was mental for agreeing to have so many Gryffindors in his house.

Our house, he mentally corrected himself.

Even after all this time, Severus still had to remind himself that Spinner's End wasn't his alone anymore. Looking around, he knew this was the case. Ever since Lily had moved in, she had added feminine touches here and there. The old threadbare furniture had been reupholstered, and the curtains were new and fresh. Still, the place wasn't impressive, and Severus could only imagine Potter turning his nose up at their modest living conditions.

After a quick shower, Severus headed downstairs for an early breakfast. He had let Lily sleep in, knowing her body still was not back to its full potential. He left a plate for her, placing a Warming Charm on it.

After that, he set to tidying up the downstairs, which consisted of the sitting room and kitchen only. Theirs was not a large house, and the more Severus cleaned, the more he wondered if having people over was the best idea.

He was on the verge of suggesting they go out somewhere, but then his thoughts were interrupted by Lily's soft steps as she padded down the stairs.

Seeing the state of the downstairs, Lily smiled.

"It looks wonderful, Sev. You didn't have to go through all this trouble." Spotting the food in the kitchen, her smile widened. Going to him, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. "You're too good for me. You really are sweet at heart. I won't hear otherwise from anyone else."

Smirking, Severus walked with Lily to the kitchen. "Only for you, Lily." Sobering as he watched her take a seat, Severus was about to inquire about changing the evening's plans, but Lily spoke.

"I'm so excited about tonight. You went through so much hassle, but it'll be great."

"Er... right," Severus replied. Remembering how disastrous their last outing had been with others, Severus changed his mind. Maybe staying home wasn't such a bad idea.

"Are you sure you're all right with this?" Lily asked, noticing his discomfort.

"It's... fine," Severus replied guardly.

Her shoulders drooping, Lily said, "But it's not. You don't seem very pleased. Why did you bother to clean the house if you don't want guests?"

Severus took the seat across from Lily and stared at her, much in the way he had years ago with his mother.

"I want you to be happy," he explained, "and if making you happy means having your friends over, then we'll do it."

"Sev, I don't- I mean, when are you going to say they're your friends, too? I know going to the pub downtown didn't work out so well, but we were having a good time until the Death Eaters showed up. You were almost friendly, even."

"It's wasn't horrible," Severus admitted, "but we're talking about several more people than Potter and Mary, and it's our house. I'm sure Potter lives in a mansion, and your sister... well, we both know Petunia won't approve of our humble abode."

"If any of them *dare* turn their nose up at us - no, Sev, not just you, *us* - then I'll take it as a slight against both of us. But I think you're worrying about nothing. James doesn't care about being wealthy."

Severus wasn't convinced, but he didn't wish to further argue the point. They spent the rest of the day preparing for the evening, and Severus had to repeatedly tell Lily to sit down and relax. She eventually made her way up the stairs and took the bath Severus hoped she would, and an hour later, she came down the stairs wearing a simple yet elegant black dress, which clung to her frame nicely, stopping just below her knees. Lily had managed to pull her hair into a French twist, which was held in place by several bobby pins.

"Lily," Severus breathed, "you look... amazing."

Lily giggled and allowed him to take her into his arms at the bottom of the stairs.

"What about you, Sev? I'd love to see you in something ravishing." Lily winked, teasing him.

"I suppose I can comply," Severus remarked wryly, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "The house is clean, and dinner is stewing in the oven. I shall be back in a few minutes."

Kissing her lightly, Severus went up the stairs to get ready, leaving Lily to read in the sitting room. After his second shower for the day,

he went into their bedroom and searched for something nice. He didn't own many decent Muggle clothes, let alone something dressy, and since Lily was wearing a Muggle dress, he figured he ought to wear something Muggle as well. Finding a clean pair of dress trousers, he slipped them on, finding that they were too large around the waist. They had belonged to Tobias, so Severus magically readjusted them. He found a white button-down shirt and added it. He left the top button undone, choosing not to wear a tie, as that seemed too formal.

Since his hair was now touching his collar bone at the longest layers, he decided to try pulling it back, something he hadn't done in months. The ponytail rested at the base of his head a minute later, but some of the shorter hairs in the front escaped, framing his face. Severus wondered if he ought to remove the tail, but figured the look was a good one and proceeded downstairs.

Upon seeing him, Lily stood, placing the book she had been reading back on the shelf.

"You look rather amazing yourself, Sev," she remarked. Grasping the tail, she smiled. "I'm glad to see your hair's longer again. You look nice like this."

"When will they be arriving?" Severus asked, blushing slightly, not used to this amount of attention.

"In fifteen minutes."

"And I trust everyone is coming who you intended?"

"Yes, I was able to get in touch with everyone. It should be a nice time."

Severus kept his comments to himself, figuring he would see how the evening actually went until he decided on whether or not it was a nice time.

Just as he finished his thoughts, someone knocked at the door, and Lily remarked, "Someone's early."

She went to the front door, followed closely by Severus. Upon opening the it, Lily found Petunia standing there. Her blonde hair was curled and pulled half-up. Like Lily, she was wearing a dress, only hers was dark blue.

"Tuney," Lily greeted her sister, inviting her in. "You look lovely."

Petunia gave her sister a brief smile. "It was... unexpected of you to have me over."

Severus conceded that point. Never once had Lily's family been to Spinner's End, but especially Petunia, who had turned his nose up for years at Severus for living on that street, would have never thought of stepping into his home a few months ago.

"You should know, Petunia, that I could have died a week ago." Lily explained the events to her sister, and Petunia's expression went from shocked to concerned to accusatory.

"And neither of you thought to inform us of this?" she demanded, glaring at Severus.

"We didn't have time to think about that," Severus cut in. "This was a serious battle, Petunia. We got her to safety, and she spent three days at Hogwarts in a coma before she was cured and brought home. Lily-"

"I didn't want any visitors, and I'm afraid I didn't want you to worry needlessly. I'm sorry, Petunia. But look, it's over now. And you should know - Severus cured me." Lily smiled appreciatively at her husband.

"Well... good," Petunia said carefully. "I guess that training you're doing... something like a doctor... that's paying off, then?" Her eyes turned to Severus.

Severus nodded.

Gazing at Lily again, Petunia stated, "But you can't do something like that again, Lily! We're still your family, and we have a right to know!"

"I'm sorry," Lily apologized for the second time. "It won't happen again. I promise."

"Well... all right, then," Petunia replied reluctantly.

Another knock issued forth from the door, and while Lily and Petunia were talking, Severus took it upon himself to greet whoever was there. He wasn't surprised to find the rest of the crowd: James, Sirius, Mary, and Remus.

"Hello, Severus!" James said earnestly. "Awfully and strangely uncharacteristically thoughtful and kind of you to have us over."

Severus stepped aside to let the group in. "It was Lily's idea," Severus replied, knowing that James had been hoping for a reaction.

Seeing Lily, James's smile widened, and he gave her a quick hug, which made Severus uncomfortable for a moment.

"You look wonderful, Lily. I'm glad you've made a full recovery," James was saying.

Mary was just behind him, and she and Lily exchanged greetings and hugs. Hanging back with his friends, James watched his future wife interact with Lily and Petunia.

"Is it true, Severus, that you found the cure for Lily?" Remus asked.

"Yes," Severus said quietly.

"Good one, Snape," Sirius said, his eyes on Petunia. "If you'll excuse me-" He sauntered over toward Petunia, who immediately blushed as he took her hand and kissed it.

Swallowing down the bile that was threatening to overspill into his mouth, Severus muttered his excuse and went into the kitchen to check on dinner. He wondered now if he really was mental for having the Marauders over his house. For some odd reason, they seemed to be treating him almost as one of their own, and Severus had to try hard to keep himself from saying something cutting.

Glancing at the group in the sitting room, Severus bitterly thought, *I was never good enough for your little club in school, but now that I've got Lily and I'm in the Order, suddenly I'm an honorary Gryffindor.*

Severus watched as Lily left the others and entered the kitchen. Seeing the sour expression on his face, she whispered, "What's wrong, Severus?"

"This evening had better be worth it," Severus muttered.

"What's the matter?" Lily was baffled at her husband's sudden change in mood. "I thought you were all right with this. If you didn't want to have them over, saying something earlier would've been a good idea." Lily's tone was hurt, and her eyes were narrowing in annoyance.

"I'm sorry, Lily," said Severus, not sounding sorry at all, "but I'm *trying* to put the past behind me, but that's no easy thing to do when I have two lifetimes worth of-

"Two lifetimes worth of what?" Mary asked as she stepped into the kitchen. Lily and Severus's heads snapped around to see the girl. Realizing she had interrupted something, Mary apologized, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean- I was just going to ask where the loo was."

"Upstairs," Lily stated.

Mary quickly exited, and Lily glared at Severus. "You have to be more careful about what you're saying," she hissed.

Turning a pale red on his cheeks, Severus clenched his teeth. "Very well. Very well, Lily. For you. I'm doing this all for you. Get their drinks. Dinner will be ready in ten minutes."

Lily sighed and put on a happy face, returning to her guests, as that's what she assumed they were since Severus obviously didn't want them there.

As promised, ten minutes later, Severus had everything on the table, which he had magically enlarged to fit everyone. A pork roast with

potatoes and carrots was the main course, and the other men graciously tucked in.

"It smells delicious," remarked Sirius. "I suppose being good at Potions makes you a good cook, Snape?"

Severus shrugged, choosing to say as little as possible. The meal commenced, and because of the larger group, conversation kept alive easily, leaving Severus the opportunity to remain silent most of the time. Lily was seated on his right, and to his left, Remus was cutting away at the meat on his plate. Besides Severus, Remus had kept quiet most of the time.

Severus was the first to excuse himself, and he cleared the table. At times like this, he wished he had a bigger house, as there was no place to go for any privacy. Saying he was taking the rubbish out, Severus stepped out the back door and threw the bag into the dust bin. He remained standing out there for a couple of minutes, looking up at the sky.

Although chilly, it wasn't an uncomfortable temperature, and the clear sky afforded a great view of the stars. Hearing the door creak, Severus jumped and turned, expecting Lily, but Remus was stepping out of the house.

The other boy pulled something from his shirt pocket, and Severus was surprised to see a packet of cigarettes.

Offering one to Severus, Remus asked, "Do you?"

Severus shook his head, making a face of disgust. "That's a horrible habit, you know," he said. "My father occasionally smoked, but drinking was his main bad habit."

Remus shrugged, lighting up and taking a long drag. "It helps with the stress of... you know."

"Your transformations," Severus said quietly.

"Yes. Thank you for... you know, never telling anyone about that in school. That was decent of you."

Choosing to ignore Remus's remark, Severus commented, "I didn't know you smoked."

Remus shrugged again. "Bad habit, you're right, but like I said... Anyway, thank you for having us to your house, Severus. I'm glad Lily is okay."

Severus grunted. "Lily likes people."

"And you don't?" Remus asked, a touch of amusement in tone.

Against his initial thoughts, Severus now realized that the dinner had gone well. Maybe the Marauders had finally accepted him.

"It depends on the person... people."

Remus finished the cigarette and threw it down, putting it out with his shoe. He picked it up.

"This may surprise you, Severus, but I don't care for most people, either... Too many insincere and fake people in this world, but my friends are genuine. I think you're the real deal, too."

Truly uncomfortable now, Severus blurted, "You could take Wolfsbane for your condition, you know."

"I can't afford it."

"I could... make it for you."

Remus was silent for a long time, then said softly, "That would be especially decent of you, Severus. Maybe even so far as nice."

Severus half-glared at the other boy and saw Remus smiling. The door opened, and Lily was peaking her head out.

"There you two are," she said, a smile creeping across her face. "Come in before it gets any colder. I'm about to serve dessert, and I know how much you both love chocolate."

Remus chuckled. "That I do, Lily." Lily left them alone again, and Remus glanced back at Severus. "I didn't know you had a sweet tooth, Severus."

"There is a lot you don't know about me, Lupin."

"You could enlighten me."

"Perhaps."

Entering the warmth of his house, Severus was welcomed with laughter and delighted chatter. He watched Remus as he joined his friends, and Lily was serving dessert.

"What are you just standing there for, Severus?" James called. "It's time for dessert!"

Although his impassive face didn't reveal anything, Severus felt his insides warm. This was real, not a dream. This was his actual home, not a fantasy home. These were people who wanted him.

He sat down and joined the party.

Author's Note: And so we indulge in a bit of happiness and a smidgeon of fluff before things get ugly and nasty again. (evil grin)

Chapter One Hundred

Over the next few months, Voldemort seemed to have gone into hiding, leaving the world with a short period of peace. Some people were far too hopeful, too foolish in their optimism, thinking that the evil overlord had simply given up his campaign and stopped.

Severus knew better. He told Lily as much on a daily basis.

Winter ended, giving way into longer and warmer days, which only added to the hope people felt brewing in their hearts. In that time, Severus and Lily remained in contact with the rest of the Order, which met on a biweekly basis. Those who were working in the Ministry kept close to any leads they had on suspicious activity, but as for attacks and battles, there simply were none.

All the more reason to be concerned, Severus thought often.

One thing that was going for him was the fact that Severus was able to keep Dumbledore at a distance, but the old wizard was helpful in seeking out clues that would lead to the location of some of the Horcruxes. As he informed Severus from time to time, he was visiting those who he thought might have useful information, collecting memories, and writing down anything from his own experience with Voldemort that might be of assistance.

On a late May day, Severus had gotten home before Lily from work and set to preparing dinner. It was usually a good way to keep his mind off worrying, as he was wont to do. Tomorrow, Lily would be going with Mary for dress-fittings, as Mary and James had finally set a date for their wedding that summer.

Ever since their dinner party with Petunia, Mary, and the Marauders a few months ago, Severus had found it easier to converse with the group whenever they met. His new life had truly settled into a good one, with the big exception of the war and Voldemort, but that was to be expected. Everyone's lives were at risk.

Hearing the front door click open, Severus glanced up from the carrots he was finely chopping to see Lily entering. She cast him a brief smile.

"Hi, Sev," she greeted him. "How was your day?"

Leaning down to accept her welcoming kiss, Severus replied, "Eventless, like most other days have been lately."

Lily glanced from side to side as if expecting someone to be nearby and whispered, "I shouldn't tell you this, but there's a room in the Department of Mysteries that contains glass orbs, which hold prophecies. I could get in big trouble if they found out I said anything, but regarding this whole prophecy with You-Know-Who and who must destroy him, I thought it interesting and potentially important."

"I hate to say this, Lily, but I already know about that room," Severus stated.

"You do?" Lily asked, deflating some.

Nodding, he said, "Yes, when Harry Potter was in his fifth year, his friends and he ventured to the Ministry and entered that very room. It just so happens that the Dark Lord wanted the record of the prophecy that concerned him from the place. He had spies working in the Ministry and had tried very hard to access it all year. When I..." Severus halted, an old guilt surfacing, but forced himself to continue, "...I didn't hear the whole prophecy. I only told him what I knew. He never knew the full thing."

"I guess it makes sense that you would know already," Lily said. "Still, who knows? It might come in handy again. Do you expect things will be altered? Who will overhear the prophecy if not you? And it can't very well be the same as it was before. When did it happen, anyway?"

"The exact date was July 1, 1979, just after another year at Hogwarts would have ended. It wasn't until several months later when I realized *who* it meant."

"Oh, Sev," Lily sighed, taking note of his sad tone on "who."

"It's okay," Severus replied, perhaps too quickly.

"You still haven't shared any of this with Dumbledore?" questioned Lily curiously.

"No," Severus said shortly, annoyed at the mention of Dumbledore. "If the date remains the same, he will find out the altered prophecy, if there is to be one. I intend to stop whoever may try to overhear it and bring it back to Voldemort."

Lily appeared uneasy. "Sev, that's dangerous."

"No more dangerous than the battles we've been fighting... or not fighting as of late." He frowned. "I'm telling you, Lily. Something isn't right about all this. He never went silent like this last time. Once he started something, it kept picking up in momentum."

Lily felt a chill go through her, despite the warm day. Sighing, she said, "Well, there's no point in driving ourselves mental worrying about it now. I'll help you with dinner."

Severus allowed the change of topic, but his mind kept returning to the prophecy.

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The next month passed much in the same way the last several had. As June drew to an end, Severus was eager to find out who would be sent to find out the prophecy, for surely Voldemort, for all his silence, was in the middle of planning that, among other serious things.

"You swear you're going to be careful?" Lily asked, concern lacing her voice.

It was the night before Severus planned to go to the Hog's Head. Severus and Lily were just lying down to go to sleep for the night.

"Don't worry, Lily," Severus reassured her. "I promise not to do anything stupid. Potter was even so generous as to lend his invisibility cloak. If I'm quiet, and I will be, I won't be found out."

Lily shivered, not liking this idea one bit. Severus wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close. Kissing the top of her head, he

murmured, "Perhaps we ought to take our minds off this. Merlin know I've been thinking about it too much."

"What do you propose?" Lily queried. "Dreamless Sleep Potion?"

Severus shook his head. "No, something else." He smiled mischievously, despite their ongoing concern about tomorrow and the future in general.

Severus was happy to see Lily return his smile with a knowing gleam in her eye.

"Severus Snape, you are indeed a Slytherin," she purred.

And they found something else to take their minds off worrying.

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Night had fallen. Severus, wearing the invisibility cloak, silently made his way through the streets of Hogsmeade. He had Disapparated, arriving in an alley not far from the end of town, and now he was headed for the Hog's Head. The front door was open, so he released a breath and entered. A couple of patrons sat at the bar, lost in their alcohol and oblivious to anyone entering.

Severus gave them a thorough appraisal and decided they were safe enough. Just to be sure, he memorized their features and proceeded down a corridor. One of the floorboards creaked, and he abruptly stopped, inwardly cursing.

A door opened. Aberforth Dumbledore was peering out into the darkened hallway.

"Who's there?" he gruffly demanded.

Severus didn't respond, hoping the man would retreat into the room again.

"Blasted rats," Aberforth mumbled, closing the door.

Severus sighed and went toward the staircase. He supposed he could cast a spell on the door to Aberforth's room to keep him from overhearing anything, but spellwork could be traced, and he didn't want to leave any trace. He wasn't the one who was supposed to be suspected of anything malicious that night.

Unlike last time, Severus thought darkly.

Why he hadn't told Dumbledore about the prophecy was due to his choice. He personally wanted to see whoever overheard it brought down.

Step by step, Severus approached the doorway, but no one were there yet. He didn't expect there to be. He resigned himself to taking a seat off to the side and waiting.

Midnight came, and still no one came upstairs. The hours ticked away, and Severus knew Lily would be at home, still awake and worrying why he hadn't yet returned.

Damn and blast, he thought, annoyed. *It's changed. There's no one here.*

Severus stood and turned for the stairs. He hesitated before going down them. Was it a misake to leave? He would return tomorrow...

So he left.

And it was indeed a mistake to have left.

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An hour later, Dumbledore and a young Sybill Trelawney were ascending the stairs, Dumbledore saying, "You think yourself fit to teach at Hogwarts, then, Sybill?"

"Why, yes, Headmaster," Trelawney replied gushingly. "Let me show you..."

They entered the room where Dumbledore had interviewed Trelawney the first time around.

Fifteen minutes passed.

Then a young man in a black robe, his face hidden in the shadows cast by the hood around his face, approached the door, pressing his ear against it.

Trelawney, as if possessed, spoke in a raspy voice:

"Born or reborn, it matters not, for they are marked with the same name... He must stand before the Dark Lord and face his enemy, and so face himself... The Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, for he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... And so one of two of the same must defeat the Dark Lord... Or death and birth will be but the same."

A rough hand suddenly grabbed the young man from the collar and spelled the door open.

"Look who was listening at the door," Aberforth said angrily.

Trelawney was staring off in the distance, still recovering from a moment ago, but Dumbledore was gazing back at his brother in shock and into the blue-grey eyes of Regulus Black.

"I... I didn't- er, wrong room. My apologies," Regulus stammered hastily. He wrenched himself out of Aberforth's grasp and ran, Disapparating before he hit the bottom of the stairs.

Author's Note: Please visit my profile page and check out the link to my forum to discuss what the prophecy means!

Chapter One Hundred-One

Unaware that the prophecy had already been revealed, Severus returned the following night to the Hog's Head. This time, he stayed the whole night, having told Lily what he planned on doing. He was extremely disappointed when dawn came and nothing had transpired.

He went into work groggy and short-tempered that day. By nightfall, he was considering whether or not to return the inn for a third time.

"But, Sev," Lily gently argued, "you're a mess already. Why do you have to take it upon yourself? Don't you think if it pertained to us that Dumbledore would let us know?"

"Indeed, he would let us know when he felt the time was right and convenient for him," Severus sneered, glaring into the flames in the fireplace.

"And do you honestly think it's a real possibility that the prophecy would refer to us? We don't have a child, and even though last time it was about a baby yet to be born, we aren't planning on having children any time soon."

"It might not be about a baby at all for all we know, Lily," Severus murmured, running his hand over his tired face. "Maybe there is to be no prophecy at all this time."

"Maybe," Lily said hopefully. "Wouldn't that mean anyone could defeat him, then?"

"Or possibly that no one would be able to defeat him," Severus pointed out. "Although, the important thing to remember is this: The prophecy was self-fulfilling last time. Voldemort chose to let it mean something, and if there is indeed a prophecy and he gets wind of it, he won't hesitate to put it into action. He is extremely paranoid and would want to end the life of whomever might destroy him."

"I don't like this whole prophecy thing," Lily remarked. "It's dodgy at best."

"It is what Voldemort wishes it to be, for surely he will act. That is what matters," Severus said witheringly.

Lily sighed. "I just... I wish he had never been born."

Half-surprised his normally compassionate and understanding wife would dare utter such a bold statement, even if it was about the Dark Lord, Severus nodded. "You're not the only one."

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A week later, while he was staring moodily into the flames of the fireplace again, swirling a glass of bourbon, Severus nearly dropped his drink when Dumbledore's head suddenly appeared in the fire.

"Dumbledore!" Severus exclaimed, alarmed, angry, and annoyed. Recovering himself, he inquired, "What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

"My apologies for calling so late, Severus," Dumbledore replied, nonplussed. His eyes settled on Severus's glass of alcohol. "Taken to your Muggle father's old habits, have you?"

Severus glowered at the infernal man. "No," he said curtly. "I was simply having a single drink. What consequence are my father's past actions to you, anyway, Dumbledore?"

"A mere observation, that is all," Dumbledore said mildly, fueling Severus's ire.

Placing the glass on the nearby table, Severus implored, "What do you want? Surely you haven't called at this absurdly late hour to merely chat about my father's alcoholism."

"Is Lily about?" Dumbledore asked.

"She's in bed," Severus replied, a crease forming between his eyebrows. "Why? Won't you just get to the point already?"

"Severus, I realize I have not been welcome in your house in the past, but it might be best if I stepped through to discuss this with you... unless you wish to step through into my office."

"I can come to your side. I don't want to disturb Lily. Let me leave her a note just in case she awakens and finds me mysteriously missing."

Severus summoned a pen and a small piece of paper and jotted a quick note to Lily, leaving it on the table. Giving Dumbledore a nod, Severus watched as the old man withdrew his head, leaving the flames to return to normal again. For a second, Severus considered not going to the man. Holding a handful of Floo Powder, he hesitated.

What does he want? If conversing with him about Order business and Horcruxes wasn't so important, I'd have closed off the Floo connection months ago.

Sighing, Severus tossed the powder into the grate, announcing his destination, and stepping through into Dumbledore's office a moment later, brushing soot off his robes. He didn't take the proffered seat. Instead, Severus stood leaning against the mantle, his arms crossed impatiently over his chest.

"Well, Dumbledore? This had better be good."

"Severus, really... Must you always be so difficult? This bit of news is worth sitting down for, I assure you, my boy," Dumbledore said gravely.

"Let's get a few things straight, sir. I'm not 'your boy.' And if I wish to stand, I shall."

A sinking feeling filling him, Severus kept his face nonetheless impassive. He already had a good idea why Dumbledore had summoned him.

"Severus, there is a prophecy." His arm waved over the Pensieve on the desk, and Trelawney's wavering form ascended from the murky depths and uttered the words Dumbledore had heard more than a

week ago. After her form was finished, she sank back into the Pensieve, and the contents went still.

"And?" Severus questioned, raising an eyebrow.

"You heard what she said. The 'reborn' part must be referring to you. It would seem you are destined to defeat Voldemort."

Severus gave a snort, despite the gravity of the situation. "Me?" he asked, feigning disbelief. "And what about this rubbish about there being two, not just one who can defeat him? Two of the same name? That would have to mean my child, but as you can plainly see, Dumbledore, Lily and I have no child. We aren't planning on having one any time soon, either... not until this war is over."

"Are you sure Lily is not pregnant?" Dumbledore asked.

"Quite sure!" Severus exclaimed, outraged. "I will not stand here and discuss my private affairs with you!"

"Severus, calm down. Tell me... Was there a prophecy the first time?" Dumbledore now raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

Severus avoided Dumbledore's gaze. Shifting uncomfortably, he stated stiffly, "And what if there was?"

"Then I should hope you would have told me."

"Yes," Severus said softly. "There was a prophecy."

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "You should also be informed that one Regulus Black overheard this prophecy and has no doubt relayed it to his master by now."

"What?!" Severus yelled, removed himself from his position near the fireplace. "You didn't think to tell me this sooner? You already waited a week to tell me there even was a prophecy, one that you think may be targeting me and/or my unborn child, and now you're telling me that the Dark Lord knows it, too! Of course, I shouldn't be surprised..."

"Why is that, Severus? Why aren't you surprised?" Dumbledore inquired curiously.

"Damn it," Severus muttered, upset with himself. "What night did you hear this prophecy?"

"It would have been very early on the second of July, although for all intents and purposes, we may say July the first."

Damn it.

Clenching his teeth and balling his fists, Severus now knew if he had only waited longer, he could have stopped Regulus.

"You still haven't answered my question, Severus. You obviously knew about the prophecy in your first life. How did this come to be? Did it involve you then as well?"

"I wasn't the one the prophecy was about, if that's what you mean," Severus muttered, now realizing he needed to tell the truth. Since his failure to stop Regulus, Severus now had lost control over the prophecy situation.

Taking a deep breath, he resumed, "The prophecy was about a boy named Harry Potter. James Potter married Lily, and they had a son. I... I was the one who overheard it. I didn't hear the entire thing, but I told the Dark Lord what I knew. He later figured out who it meant. When I realized Lily's life was in danger, I came to you. That's when I started spying for you. Are you happy now, Dumbledore? Are you pleased to know that no matter what I do, you always seem to come out on top, always the one in control, with me at your mercy? Do you have any idea how much I hate that?" he spat the last words out harshly, feeling a sour taste in his mouth.

The words seemed to have been wrenched from him. Something Severus wished to have kept a secret from the old man had now been revealed. In his bitter failure, Severus sighed and dropped into a chair.

Dumbledore remained silent.

"I don't know... if I can keep doing this," Severus whispered, staring at the floor. For once, he was defeated and undone, and it made him resent the old man in front of him all the more.

Suddenly, Severus felt a hand on his shoulder. He cringed, but did not shake it off.

"Oh, Severus," Dumbledore said sadly. "You have little reason to believe me, but I am terribly sorry. This is not something you should have had to have placed upon you, not after everything you've already endured."

"Who's to say anything about anything?" Severus asked the room at large, his tone weary and ragged.

This is the irony of getting another chance. Maybe nothing I've done so far is enough to right my wrongs.

To be stuffed into Harry Potter's place, the very boy whom Severus had taken a certain joy in tormenting with his unfair treatment but protected nonetheless, was a cosmic joke, to be sure. Fate was having sweet revenge now.

Dumbledore shook his head. "There is little rhyme or reason to anything in how this crazy world operates most of the time, Severus, but..." Sitting across from the young wizard, Dumbledore spoke sincerely, "...but I believe in you. No lies, no deceit, no manipulations... just good, plain truth. I think the hardest lesson you've struggled with has been forgiving yourself all these years."

"You will help?" Severus asked in almost a whisper, choosing not to respond to Dumbledore's words.

"I will do all I can," Dumbledore reassured him.

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Severus returned home that night feeling numb and drained. It was true enough that he had hoped to play an instrumental role in bringing

Voldemort down or perhaps even be the one to personally defeat him, but those had been thoughts, ideas, ambitions... not born reality. If Voldemort interpreted the prophecy to mean Severus or his offspring, then Severus realized his predicament was just like Harry's.

He didn't want to be "The Chosen One." If his son or daughter had to finish off Voldemort instead, that was a horrible nightmare and all the worse. The very idea of his own child having to undertake a task that enormous pulled Severus into a pit of despair. If Lily and he died trying to protect the child... just like Lily and James...

Severus groaned, tugging at his hair. How could he have been so cruel to Harry before? How could he have taunted the boy, thinking he enjoyed his fame? How could he have used the memory of his father against him and been so petty? How could he have never once, until his death, revealed the truth about his love for the boy's mother?

Severus glared at the half-empty glass of bourbon sitting on the table and went for it. He downed the rest of the contents and filled it once more. Swirling the liquid around, he held it up and stared at the fire through it. He drank again.

He found he could sympathize with Tobias's bad habit and considered making a late visit to his father's flat and asking the man if he wanted to go out for a drink. Reckless and foolish though his behavior was, all rationality seemed to have left Severus that night. He saw the note he had left to Lily and decided if she woke, she could assume he was still with Dumbledore. The old man did have a tendency of keeping him for several hours at a time.

Stepping out into the mild July night, Severus walked to the park where he had often played with Lily as a child. He withdrew into the copse of trees where they had hidden, "their spot." Sighing, he Disapparated, appearing right in the sitting room of Tobias's flat.

Hearing the loud cracking noise, Tobias bolted out of his bedroom, a gun in one hand.

"Bloody hell, Severus!" Tobias exclaimed. "You scared the shit outta me! What are you doing?"

"You're not supposed to have a gun, Father. Isn't that illegal?"

"Well... y-yes," Tobias stuttered, "but you remember what I told Lily's dad the day of your wedding? I don't much care if it's legal or not. With those Death Eaters, or whatever they're called, running amuck, I'm not leaving my safety unchecked."

Severus frowned. "Well, put it away. It's not that late yet, anyway. The pubs are still open."

Staring at his son and frowning, Tobias placed the gun down slowly, disbelieving what his son was suggesting. "Severus, are you quite all right?"

"Just wonderful," Severus stated sarcastically. "Come on, Father. What do you say? There's nothing like reliving old times, is there?" he sneered, thinking much more about his own past than Tobias's.

Coming toward Severus, Tobias hissed, "What's got into you? You never go out drinking in the middle of the night, Severus. I can smell the alcohol on your breath already. It's already past midnight, and no, I won't go out drinking with you."

"A good drink and getting pissed would do wonders for me right now, Father."

Grabbing hold of Severus's shoulders, Tobias shook him firmly. "And what about Lily, your wife? I suppose you've just left her at home, unaware of what you're about to do?" Pausing, Tobias said morosely, "You don't want to do this, Severus. Whatever it is, there are other ways. When morning comes, you'll still have to face whatever it is that's bothering you. Don't... don't make my mistakes. You taught me the right way, Severus. Take your own advice and be the better man that I know you already are."

Something in his father's words struck Severus, and he backed away, sinking into the sofa.

"I'm sorry," he said hollowly, staring at the floor. "I... I don't know what got into me."

Taking a seat next to him, Tobias implored, "Do you want to talk about it? Is it... this war?"

"Yes, it's about the war. Everything is about this bloody war," Severus spat bitterly. "But no, I don't wish to discuss it further. It won't do any good, and there's nothing you can do to help, Father."

"Did I at least keep you from drinking?" Tobias asked sardonically.

Severus forced a wan smile. "Yes, Father. Thank you."

"Good. Then go home to your wife, Severus. It's late."

Severus stood and nodded, returning home.

When Severus opened the front door, he was shocked to find Lily sitting downstairs at the kitchen table, holding a cup of tea in her hands and staring off into the distance, her eyes red-rimmed. When he entered, her gaze turned toward him, and in one swift motion, she rushed to him and threw her arms around him.

"Where were you, Severus?" she demanded, a sob escaping.

Bringing his arms gently around his wife, Severus smoothed her hair down. "Dumbledore called me."

"Then why were you outside? You would have come through the Floo otherwise."

"Didn't you see my note?"

"I did, but... do you have any idea what time it is?"

Severus watched guiltily as Lily's eyes drifted to the open bottle of bourbon and the glass next to it, telling signs of his earlier behavior.

"Were you out drinking?" she asked. "Your breath-"

"No," Severus cut her off firmly, "but I almost... Oh, Lily..." He hugged her tighter, afraid of losing her.

"Sev, you're trembling. What's the matter? What did Dumbledore say to you?"

"There was a prophecy. He thinks it means me or our child or both of us. The Dark Lord has now heard it, too." Severus was surprised how easily the words came from his mouth.

Lily gasped. "No, that can't be, but You-Know-Who, how would he know who it means?"

"He will find a way to figure it out."

"But we have no child, Sev."

"I told Dumbledore as much, but it could refer to a child yet to be born."

"I'm not pregnant."

"Do you know that for sure?" he asked warily.

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Two weeks later, Severus paced nervously in the basement, where a small lab of his own had been set up. Lily was at the table, holding a sample of her blood, her hand shaking.

"Should I add it now?" she asked.

"You... you might as well," Severus replied tremulously. He stopped in his pacing to watch Lily.

With a dropper, she added a small amount of clear potion to the vial of blood.

"If it's positive, it will turn green," Severus said. "Negative, yellow."

Lily nodded, swallowing. Severus came to stand next to her. Both of them kept their eyes fixed to the vial of blood. The red started to change color, going brown and then turning...

"Green," Lily breathed.

"That's it, then. You're pregnant," Severus murmured, his fears confirmed.

What should have been a happy occasion was riddled with concern.

Also, I'm happy to share that someone was kind enough to nominate this story for the Quibbler Awards. Voting begins on Aug. 26, so please vote for this fic if you feel it's worthy of winning in the categories of "Best Alternate Universe" and "Most Original" fic. You can vote here: [quibbler . this-paradise . com](http://quibbler.this-paradise.com) (remove spaces)

I've updated my Cafe Press shop with new T-shirts, featuring artwork by LilyHBP (thanks, Lily) and more artwork by me. Check out the link on my profile page!

Also, if you like Harry Potter dolls, you may be interested in ordering one that's custom made by me. See my Etsy shop for more details: [sindie11 . etsy . com](http://sindie11.etsy.com) (remove spaces)

Thanks for a great year, everyone! This fic iwill/i most definitely be finished before another whole year passes!

On a side note, who else is pissed at the WB for postponing HBP until JULY 17, 2009?!

Now, onto what you're here for...

Chapter One Hundred-Two

Severus was stunned. For the next several days, he floated through his daily routine like he was only half-awake, thinking it had to be a dream that Lily was actually pregnant. In less than nine months, he would be a father. She would become the mother of his child this time around, and that poor child was already destined to be in Harry Potter's place... unless Severus himself was able to defeat Voldemort.

"Should we tell Dumbledore?" Lily asked for the umpteenth time.

She had been posing that same question all week and into the next. Severus was bone-weary. He sighed and rubbed at his eyes in agitation.

"I... I don't know, Lily!" he exclaimed, causing her to visibly withdraw. Seeing the hurt expression on her face, he amended, "I'm sorry. It's just... this is a really, really serious dilemma we've got ourselves in,

Lily. Dumbledore was already insinuating that you were most likely pregnant when I last spoke with him and he told me about the prophecy. Besides, revealing the fact that you are pregnant to too many people is simply going to spread the news faster."

"I know you're stressed about it, Sev, but don't you want people to know? To be happy for us? We should at the very least tell our families."

"All right," Severus gave in. "You can tell your family, but I'm holding off telling my father."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just don't feel completely comfortable telling that sort of thing to him. I honestly can't imagine him being a grandparent, and even now, there is much I choose not to share with him."

Inwardly, Severus was feeling the lingering guilt from his near jaunt into a night of pub-hopping. Only Tobias's insistent words had stopped him, and to have been put in the position of being at his father's mercy was unsettling to Severus. He had hoped to be in control of his own life and not have to depend upon the man who had made his life difficult for so long. As much as that relationship was healed, there remained a scar.

"You don't have to tell him if you don't want to," Lily said, "but you will have to eventually." She offered a hopeful smile, which Severus returned with a grimace.

"Perhaps."

"Well, getting back about whether or not to tell Dumbledore-" Lily started to say, but then the fire turned green in the grate, and the subject of her sentence appeared in the flames.

"Ah, good evening, Severus, Lily," Dumbledore said, the smile on his face oddly smug. "I was hoping to find you home."

"Good evening, sir," Lily returned, forcing herself to calm from his sudden intrusion.

Annoyed at Dumbledore for the second calling in two weeks, Severus questioned, "What is it now, headmaster?"

"I think you will be pleased to hear that I have procured one of the Horcruxes," Dumbledore stated.

All thoughts evaporated from both of their minds. Lily's mouth was hanging open in shock, and Severus had to momentarily recover himself.

"Which one?" he asked, stepping closer to Dumbledore.

"The ring," the headmaster replied. "I found it in the rubble of Tom Riddle's mother's old house."

"How did you figure to look there?" questioned Lily incredulously.

"Do you mind if I step through?" Dumbledore hastened.

"Very well," Severus stated curtly, only because this was business directly related to the destruction of Voldemort.

Dumbledore gave a nod and entered the sitting room of Spinner's End. Grasped in his right hand was a ring with a black stone. Dumbledore held the ring up so Severus and Lily could more easily see it.

"I trust this is the ring you spoke of?" inquired Dumbledore.

"Yes," Severus said, examining the stone, which wasn't yet cracked.

Dumbledore pulled his hand back and held the ring close to his face, eyeing it carefully. "Curious, very curious," he murmured. "I wonder..."

Suddenly, Dumbledore's eyes took on a faraway look. He seemed drawn to the stone, and Severus and Lily watched as Dumbledore made to put the ring on his finger.

"No!" Severus shouted, physically charging Dumbledore in his fright and grabbing at the ring.

Alarmed, Dumbledore staggered backward and snatched the ring back toward his robes.

"Severus, what in the name of Merlin are you playing at?" Dumbledore asked, stunned by the young wizard's behavior.

"Just don't put the bloody thing on," Severus ground out harshly.

"Severus, what-?" Lily started to say, but then realization struck her. Before Severus even began his rant toward Dumbledore, she remembered him telling her about Dumbledore putting on a cursed ring. This had to be it.

"That ring carries a terrible curse. It's a Horcrux, sir, so surely you realize the Dark Magic it possesses. To even think about putting on such a thing is sheer madness. In fact, you were foolish enough to have slipped that very ring on your finger once before, Dumbledore. 'Sorely tempted' were your exact words. I don't know what the hell drove you to attempt such an act, but had you done the same thing now, you would quickly find that your hand would have been irreparably blackened and damaged. You would have needed me to confine the damned curse to your bloody hand, and even then you'd have only had a year to live!" Severus raged at Dumbledore, unable to hold in his resentment.

Severus's breathing continued to be heavy, and Lily stepped up beside him, laying a hand on his arm in the hopes of calming him. Dumbledore's blue eyes shifted from the ring to the couple standing a few feet away from him. Finally gazing directly into Severus's face, Dumbledore said in a remarkably calm voice, "If that is the case, then thank you for saving my life, Severus... both times."

Ignoring Dumbledore's gratitude, Severus stated, "Why did you almost put that thing on just now?"

"Severus, that doesn't really matter right now. If this is in fact a Horcrux, which I am quite certain it is, then it will need to be destroyed as soon as possible."

"How did you know where to look?" Lily couldn't help but ask.

"I have been doing much research on the possible whereabouts of the Horcruxes and what the remaining objects might be," Dumbledore explained. "Voldemort would have chosen locations that were significant in his life, and the objects he chose to use to house pieces of his soul would have been significant as well. This ring belonged to the Gaunt family, who were Voldemort's only remaining pureblood relatives left before his birth. They were the last in the line of Slytherin. This ring was one of the few remaining objects they possessed that was worth anything."

"Then why put it on if you knew what its value was?" Severus persisted. "Let me see the ring... if you please."

Frowning, Dumbledore seemed reluctant to part with it. Severus took the ring carefully, seeing the markings on the stone, which he didn't recognize. He frowned and then felt captivated by the stone. Thoughts of bringing his mother back to life, to be with her once again, suffused him. He shook his head, blinking, and closed his hand over the ring again, passing it back to Dumbledore.

No, but it can't be possible, Severus thought. That's just a children's story.

Just before Severus's death, the Dark Lord had spoken of the Elder Wand, much to Severus's confusion. The Elder Wand was supposedly a legend. As a child, Severus had been familiar with The Tale of the Three Brothers, which spoke of the Deathly Hallows. The Elder Wand... the Resurrection Stone... the Invisibility Cloak...

Potter's cloak? Severus thought with a start. Gazing at Dumbledore, he wondered aloud, "The Resurrection Stone?"

"It is as I thought," Dumbledore murmured quietly. "Yes, but it would appear that Voldemort was not aware of its power. Surely he has no

lost loved ones whom he would wish to see again. Now you understand why I almost put the ring on my finger... and why I did in your other life?"

"But that's impossible," Severus tried to rationalize. "It's just a myth, a story."

"Uh, excuse me, but what are you two talking about?" Lily asked, thoroughly confused.

Dumbledore explained The Tale of the Three Brothers to Lily, whose eyebrows were raised with incredulity.

Shaking his head and finding his patience wearing thin, Severus said, "Well, what are we waiting for, then? Let's destroy the bloody thing. Get the sword, Dumbledore."

"Ah, but that is not so easy, Severus," Dumbledore said mildly. "You see, no one has seen the Sword of Gryffindor in many, many years. It must be taken under conditions of need and valor. It does not merely appear to just anyone."

"But you had it hidden in your office," Severus argued. "Once Potter-"

Realizing his slip, Severus stopped speaking and pushed up his mental barriers.

"Go on, Severus," Dumbledore urged. "I'm assuming you're referring to the boy the prophecy referred to... Harry Potter? What did he do?"

With growing impatience, Severus said, "He procured the sword in his second year at Hogwarts, and from that moment onward, you kept it hidden in your office. I do not know the details of how he got the damned thing, but he did. It was the same year when he destroyed the diary, the other Horcrux I told you about. Lucius Malfoy placed the diary in an unsuspecting student's things, and the diary possessed her. The Dark Lord's younger self was nearly brought back to life. He opened the Chamber of Secrets, sir. He was the Heir of Slytherin and all that rot. In the chamber, that is when Potter somehow procured the sword, and he destroyed a basilisk with it. You told the staff a

summary of these events, but I do not know the specific details. That sword was integral to destroying the ring and at least one other Horcrux, but you never told me what that Horcrux was."

"Had you informed me of this earlier, you could have saved me some frustration, Severus. Why did you not think to tell me this?" Dumbledore questioned, his voice wavering on stern.

"Now, wait a moment here," Lily interjected, tired of being ignored and perplexed by the exchanges between her husband and the headmaster, "you can't blame Severus. Can you expect him to remember everything that happened? Is it fair for you to put him in the position of being your source of so much vital information again?"

Touched by Lily's boldness, Severus felt justified in his reasoning for keeping certain facts from the nosy headmaster until now. Dumbledore sighed.

"My apologies," he said. "Very well, Severus. We will need to procure the sword... somehow. For now, I think it would do you well to be informed that through a memory from one Bob Ogden, I was able to deduce with a large amount of certainty that one of the Horcruxes is the locket of Slytherin, this being in addition to what I learned of the ring. From this, I am left to assume that Voldemort may have used something belonging to Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw as well. Assuming that the Sword of Gryffindor is most likely not a Horcrux, then that gives us five, including this diary."

Severus was shocked that Dumbledore actually revealed information to him about the additional Horcruxes, but didn't say so. Instead, he inquired, "Then where does this leave us?"

"We are left hanging for now, regrettably, but we have one Horcrux, and we have leads for the others. I will keep the ring locked up tight, and until our next meeting, goodbye."

"Good evening, sir," Lily said, but Severus kept his thin lips firmly shut, watching as Dumbledore stepped into the grate and disappeared in a swirl of robes and green flames.

"Well, we're one step closer to destroying him, Sev," Lily pointed out, trying to be optimistic.

Severus placed a hand on each of Lily's shoulders, brushing her hair off them.

"All right, then," he whispered. "Maybe... maybe this can still work." He motioned toward her stomach, and a smile fluttered across Lily's face.

"Somehow, Sev, I think it will. Despite the situation, I am happy that we're going to be having a child together."

Severus relaxed, too tired from the day to keep his guard up any longer. Resting his forehead against Lily's, his hair sweeping forward over both of their cheeks, Severus actually smiled. "I just hope he or she has your nose. And your eyes."

Lily laughed.

Chapter One Hundred-Three

By mid-August, Lily was starting to experience the unpleasantness of morning sickness. After coming home from work one day, she bolted up the stairs, leaving Severus standing in the kitchen, looking shocked and confused by her behavior. He could hear the retching coming from the bathroom and sighed, but smiled a little. Five minutes later, Lily was heading back down the steps and into the kitchen.

"Ridiculous, bloody..." she muttered sourly. "They ought to call it 'anytime sickness.' I'm sick in the morning, true enough, but also during the afternoon, the evening, and into the night sometimes." Sniffing, Lily asked, "And what are you cooking, Sev? Don't tell me it's red meat-"

Half-smiling guiltily, Severus replied, "Actually..."

He watched as Lily walked across the kitchen and opened the oven, closing it almost the second she opened it. Wrinkling her nose in disgust, Lily stated, "Ugh, I don't think I can eat that! The very thought of- ew, Sev!"

"Did you have a bad day, then?" he asked casually, trying not to laugh.

"It's not funny, Severus!" Lily replied heatedly. "If you had to walk around feeling nauseous, worrying you might vomit at any moment... the smells of random things setting said urge to vomit off... and then, then- these stupid mood swings!" She threw her hands up in exasperation.

Severus placed the spoon he had been using down on the countertop and went to his wife. He leaned in and kissed her, cupping her chin in his hand. "Is that a little better?" he posed.

Sighing, Lily dropped into the nearby chair and sighed ruefully. "A little," she admitted. Running a hand through her hair, she frowned. "Looks like I'll need to wash my hair tonight... again. I just did this morning."

"Now you know how I feel," Severus replied. "At least your excess of grease is only temporary."

"I'm going to look disgusting tomorrow," Lily complained.

"You are not," Severus said seriously. "You could never look 'disgusting.' Leave that up to me," he tried to joke, hoping to lighten her mood.

"You don't look disgusting!" Lily protested. "But Mary and James's wedding is tomorrow, Sev, and the day after that-

"Is our one year anniversary, yes," Severus finished for her. "Do you suppose Potter chose to have his wedding the same weekend on purpose?"

"Mary picked the date," Lily pointed out. Sniffing again, she asked, "Are you making potatoes?"

"Yes."

"I'll have some of those. Potatoes with some pickles sounds good for dinner."

Severus cast Lily a strange look, but knew she wasn't joking. She had been keeping a jar of dill pickles in the refrigerator the past two weeks.

"Dinner's almost ready," he said. "Just relax. I'll be over with the plates in a minute."

Severus returned his attention to finishing dinner. His mind had been battling between normal, everyday affairs like work and family and more serious affairs such as the threat of the war and what the Prophecy held in store for them. Moments ago when he had been trying to lighten Lily's hormone-induced bad mood, he had almost forgotten that there even was a war or a Prophecy. For a few minutes, he could almost believe and live in the delusion that they were normal people about to have their first child, and they could be excited and happy about it.

But Severus was happy about the child. His initial feelings of dread and worry over the baby's future had slowly given way to the fascination of the new life growing inside Lily. In a few short months, they would be parents. His precious Lily was with him, and they were about to celebrate one year together as a married couple, and she was happy to be with him, to love him, to have his child.

His feelings mixed, Severus scooped a plate of potatoes and added some of the pickles, as per Lily's request. He filled his own plate and took the two of them to the table, setting them delicately on the surface and taking his seat.

"I trust it is to your liking?" he asked.

"Yes," Lily replied, finding it in her to smile.

Her mood improved after having some food in her, but Severus's mood slowly grew bitter as his mind drifted back to the Prophecy and the fact that Dumbledore and he needed to make real progress with the Horcruxes... and soon.

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The next morning found Lily kneeling in front of the toilet. Severus was awakened to the sound, smell, and sight of vomit. Going toward the bathroom to check on Lily, he leaned against the doorframe, waiting for her to notice him there. When the urge to vomit finally subsided, Lily stood and flushed the toilet, wiping at her mouth with her forearm and groaning. Turning, she saw her husband standing there, and her eyebrows arched inwardly in annoyance.

"Well, you could've at least held my bloody hair back," Lily remarked, turning on the tap to wash her hands. Finishing, she touched her hair and sighed. "Of course, who wants to touch such oil-laden hair? It's disgusting, Sev. I might just cut it all off."

Severus silenced Lily with a kiss. "No, love, don't do any such thing. You're as lovely as always. It took over a year for your hair to grow out this much, and it's lovely, like the color of leaves in autumn."

Lily sighed. "I wasn't serious," she replied. "It's just... I feel so gross, even if I don't look particularly horrible... yet. How am I going to manage when I'm all fat and waddling about like a duck?"

Shaking his head, Severus said, "You're pregnant, Lily. You're going to be beautiful the whole time; I don't doubt it. If you're feeling up to it, let's get some breakfast."

Lily's eyes drifted to Severus's reflection in the mirror and noticed that he had black circles around his eyes. He was appearing tired and frazzled, and she frowned. "Didn't you sleep well?"

"It's nothing," he said, trying to wave off her concern.

"Oh, Sev, I'm sorry. I've been selfish and letting my problems consume me. What's the matter?"

"It's just this stupid Prophecy," Severus admitted. "My mind won't let me dwell on anything else for longer than a few minutes before it returns to the Prophecy. I never believed such rot before, but now that it concerns us, I cannot help it."

Taking his hand, Lily led Severus into the hallway and down the stairs. "You sit down," she instructed. "You've been an amazing husband, what with putting up with my horrible mood swings and cooking for me. You shouldn't keep your concerns all bottled up like this, Sev. It's unhealthy."

Severus reluctantly took his seat, but when Lily went for the refrigerator, he immediately made to stand.

"No," Lily said sternly, "you relax. I'm going to prepare breakfast... and then a shower, I think."

Severus nodded. "All right, but don't overtax yourself." He refrained from commenting further on his worries, wishing Lily wouldn't fret over him.

Lily actually laughed. "I'm pregnant, Sev, not an invalid."

Lily set to preparing the meal, including making the coffee, and ten minutes later, they were enjoying breakfast. Soon after, Lily returned to the bathroom to shower, leaving Severus to clean up, as he had offered.

The rest of the morning was spent showering for Severus and finding a decent dress robe to wear. Mary and James were having a wizard wedding, so dress was expected to be robes. His dress robes from his school days were too short, so Severus had to lengthen them. He glared at his reflection, not pleased. Lily, on the other hand, was dazzling in her dress robe, a deep green garment that brought out her eyes and complemented her red hair.

"What's wrong?" she posed, coming to stay beside him.

"They're so... plain. Potter comes from a wealthy pureblood family, Lily, and the wedding is being held in his back garden."

"From what I understand, the Potters are nice and decent people. Poor Mr. Potter is quite old and is ailing from what I've heard, but they were gracious enough to offer their home for the location of the wedding. Mary was thrilled."

"Yes, thrilled because she has her eyes set on a large fortune," Severus muttered.

"Severus, that's not a nice thing to say about my friend," Lily said pointedly.

Severus turned away from the mirror. "Forget I said it, then. Anyway, these robes will have to do." Seeing that Lily's hair was down, he asked, hoping to change the subject, "Are you putting your hair up? It's pretty hot outside."

Lily decided it best to just let Severus's comment go. "I guess so," she said, taking hold of her locks and twirling them around until she had a bun at the base of her head. "What about you?"

Severus nodded. "I might as well." Gathering his hair into a low ponytail, Severus was pleased to find that all of his hair stayed back this time. It had grown quite long again.

"I always liked the ponytail look on you," Lily remarked. "It's sexy."

The next thing Severus knew, Lily was leaning into him, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him fervently. He didn't object. Her crazy mood swings had their advantages, after all!

Some time later, the both of them were redressing and running their wands over the fabric, smoothing out the wrinkles.

"It seemed rather silly to dress so early, anyway," Lily stated, fixing her hair for the second time.

Severus smirked. "Indeed."

Determined to keep his mind on happier things for the rest of the day after a welcome distraction such as the one minutes ago, Severus righted himself. Checking the time, he said, "We ought to be going in a few minutes."

Adding the last finishing touches to her make up, Lily nodded. "All right, I'm ready when you are."

Severus took Lily's arm, and together, they Disapparated to the Potters' garden, where guests were arriving. Several rows of white folding chairs had been set up, an aisle between them with a white runner. The decorations were elegant and expensive-looking, and Severus wasn't surprised. The Potters had the money to spend on a lavish wedding, and Mary was a girl who had a taste for anything fancy and formal. He wasn't jealous in the least, though. His wedding had been plenty elegant and the perfect day until the Death Eater attack. Gazing around, Severus shuddered, hoping there wouldn't be a repeat of that today. It was unlikely, seeing as all of the people were wizards and witches here, but the Potters were considered blood traitors.

"Which side should we sit on?" Lily asked.

"There are fewer people on Mary's side," Severus pointed out. Thinking about his relationship with James over the past several months, Severus had to concede that he could no longer call the other man an enemy, but neither did he feel comfortable labelling him a friend.

"Potter no doubt has plenty of admirers already," he added as an afterthought.

Lily narrowed her eyes at Severus as they took seats on the bride's side. "Severus, must you still be bitter about the past?" she whispered.

Severus glanced across the aisle to see Remus and Sirius off to the side. They were James's attendants. Before he could reply, as soon as he turned his head back toward Lily, he saw that the Longbottoms were joining them.

"Hullo, Severus, Lily," Frank greeted them. "Beautiful day, eh?"

"Yes, very," Lily replied. "How are you both doing?" Seeing Alice's bulging stomach, her eyes gaped. "Wow, Alice! When's the baby due?"

"Just a little over a month to go," the other woman replied, smiling as she ran her hands over her belly. "It's been a while since we've seen you, hasn't it?"

Lily nodded. Severus wondered if Lily would say anything about her own pregnancy, but then Alice stated, "It's a boy, you know. We found out months ago and wanted to keep it a secret from everybody until he arrived, but..."

"Knowing Alice, she couldn't keep her excitement at bay," Frank chimed in, chuckling good-naturedly. "We've come up with a name, in fact."

Let me guess. Neville? thought Severus sardonically.

"Do you care to share?" Lily asked.

"Well, we have to keep something a surprise," Alice laughed, "so no, we're waiting until he's born."

"I'm very happy for you," Lily said sincerely.

"Thank you, Lily," replied Alice, who gazed past Lily at Severus. "You're awfully quiet, Severus. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Severus said. Forcing a smile, he added, "The best to you both."

At that moment, the music began, signaling everyone to quiet. Sirius and Remus were standing at the front, joined by an oddly nervous James. Severus didn't think it possible to see such an emotion openly displayed on the other man's face, but it was evident that James was sweating, as his hair was sticking to his forehead, and he kept taking off his glasses to wipe around his eyes. He shifted from one foot to the other, and at one point, Sirius leaned in and smirked, whispering something into his best mate's ear.

Two bridesmaids came down the aisle, both sisters of Mary's. Severus recognized them from their days at Hogwarts. Glancing at Lily, he wondered if she was put out because Mary hadn't asked her to be a part of the bridal party, but then again, Lily hadn't asked Mary, either. They had agreed on a small wedding, and Lily had deliberated for several weeks on whether to pick Petunia or Mary as her maid of honor. In the end, Petunia had won out. Severus wondered if there was any tension between the girls because of it. He wasn't even sure how close of friends Lily was with Mary, but she had been gracious enough to accompany Mary during her dress fittings and offer premarital advice where needed. Severus frowned, thinking Mary was selfish to not have asked Lily to be a bridesmaid, but he kept his thoughts to himself, as Mary herself was about to come down the aisle.

The music changed, and everyone stood. Mary was a pretty enough girl, Severus supposed, but as he watched her walk down the aisle, his mind drifted back to his own wedding day, remembering how

radiantly beautiful his bride had been... and still was. He smiled a little and wrapped an arm around Lily. Lily, surprised by her husband's outward display of affection in public, grinned up at him, then turned her attention back to Mary.

Mary reached the front, and the ceremony began. James seemed to have calmed down some, and as the service progressed, Severus's mind was elsewhere. Despite the promise he'd made to himself a couple of hours earlier not to dwell on the Prophecy, his mind returned to that place.

Before he knew it, Mary and James were announced as husband and wife, and the music began. People stood and clapped as the apparently happy couple recessed down the aisle. As soon as Lily stood, however, she instantaneously felt a wave of nausea wash over her, and she frantically grabbed onto Severus's arm for support. Alarmed, Severus took hold of both of her shoulders, concerned for her, but then Lily was retching... all down the front of his robes. Most people didn't notice, as their eyes were on James and Mary, and the music drowned out Lily's vomiting, but Alice and Frank turned their attention to Lily. Alice was at her side in a couple of seconds, and the people directly in front of and behind them were gazing at them in shock.

"Lily?" Alice asked. "Are you all right?"

Righting herself, Lily stammered, "It's... it's nothing. I'm fine, really." Seeing Severus's front, her face crumpled in mortification. "Oh, Sev, I'm so sorry! Here, let me-" She brought her wand up, ready to clean the vomit off, but Severus stilled her hand.

"Lily, don't worry about it," he said as calmly as possible, wishing people would stop staring. "I've got it." He quickly Evanescoded the vomit away and Scourgified his robes. "There, good as new," he stated.

"Lily," Alice was saying again, "I don't mean to pry, but... are you pregnant? I had morning sickness all the time, too, you see..."

Lily blushed, giving the truth away. Reluctantly, she nodded.

"Congratulations!" Alice practically squealed.

"Hush, Alice," Lily murmured, not wishing to draw more attention to them. "We haven't told anyone yet. It's only been a few weeks, and-"

Alice nodded with understanding. "Don't worry on it, Lily. I'm sorry for my exuberance, but this is exciting." She smiled.

"Yes, Severus and I are very happy," Lily said, for it was true, even if they had a lot to worry about at the same time.

Alice's eyes reached Severus, and she nodded at him. "Congratulations to you as well, Severus. I'm sure you'll make great parents."

Frank gave his congratulations as well. People were starting to be dismissed row-by-row. From behind them, Dumbledore had been watching the whole display. When it came time for the row Severus, Lily, Alice, and Frank were in to greet the wedding party, Severus caught Dumbledore's eye and gazed back at the man, realizing with a jolt that Dumbledore now knew Lily was pregnant. Dumbledore gave him a knowing look and smiled slightly.

Don't smile at me, old man, Severus thought angrily. Always prying where it's none of your business.

Lily and Alice were quietly talking about babies behind him, leaving Severus first to greet the bridal party. He politely shook hands with the parents of the bride and groom. When he reached Mary, he awkwardly shook her hand.

"Congratulations, Mary," he stated rather stiffly.

"Thank you," Mary returned, gushing. "I'm glad you and Lily could make it."

Sure you are. You could ask for Lily's help with your wedding, but you didn't see fit to include her in your bridal party? I dare hope you're happy to be married to pompous Potter.

"Yes, well..." Severus said, trailed off.

Seeing his disdainful expression, Mary replied, "Er... right." She turned her attention to Lily and Alice, and Severus moved on to James, actually relieved to be away from someone else and with him.

"Congratulations," Severus repeated, hoping to end the potential conversation there.

James earnestly shook Severus's hand, and Severus had to wrench his hand away. Laughing, James asked, "Who would've thought we'd be goin' to each other's weddings, eh, Severus?"

"Yes, imagine that," Severus said dryly.

Much to his dismay, Sirius leaned in, smacking James on the back. "This ol' bugger's been dying to get hitched for months now. He's still jealous you beat him to the punch, Snape!" Sirius laughed in his typical bark-like manner.

James blushed at Sirius's comment. Severus shook his head, hoping to move on and be done with the required customs. He was thankful that the two Gryffindor jocks in front of him hadn't witnessed Lily's display of her breakfast all down his front earlier.

Just as Severus was disentangling himself from the crowd, however, a goat Patronus landed in the midst of the guests.

In Aberforth's gruff voice, it announced, "The Muggle Parliament building has been destroyed. You-Know-Who's doing."

Author's Note: Uh-oh! On a happier note, if you want to see pics of Sev and Lily's child (and find out his name), check out my DeviantArt page. My username is sindie11.

Chapter One Hundred-Four

"The Muggle Parliament building has been destroyed. You-Know-Who's doing."

Aberforth's Patronus dissolved, leaving complete and utter silence in its wake... for a couple of seconds.

Then pandemonium broke out. Guests exclaimed their shock and disbelief.

"Impossible!"

"You-Know-Who's capable of a lot of things, but to blow up the Muggle Parliament building?"

"No, that's ridiculous!"

Dumbledore kept his face oddly calm, and Severus surveyed the aged wizard from across the crowd. The message had obviously been intended for Dumbledore, but since he was currently in the midst of a hundred other people, the news would spread like untamed Fiendfyre.

Dumbledore was muttering something to Elphias Doge, his longtime friend, and Doge was nodding, his normally cheerful face drawn and morose. Dumbledore approached James and Mary, taking their hands and apparently expressing his regret to leave so soon, but after his final words to the newlyweds, he Disapparated with a pop.

Severus turned back to Lily.

"That's... horrible," Lily whispered, shaking her head. "What do you suppose we're to do?"

"If by 'we,' you mean the Order of the Phoenix, then I have no doubt that Dumbledore will be calling a meeting within twenty-four hours," Severus stated. Lowering his voice, he said, "Nothing like this happened before... you know."

Lily nodded with understanding, catching his meaning that he was referring to his first life.

Suddenly, a clanging noise alerted them, and Severus and Lily turned to face a spoon hitting a crystal goblet, both of which were floating some two feet above James and Mary in the air.

"If we might have everyone's attention," James announced, "Dumbledore has asked that we continue on for now. He has gone to investigate. This is a terrible tragedy, but he seemed to think it worth celebrating something today, a day that will be remembered otherwise with tragedy."

As James spoke, his voice was strangely hollow and despondent. Severus imagined that his old adversary found it difficult as anyone, save Voldemort and his followers, to be joyful on a day like today.

Most of the people were nodding with understanding. A few feet away, the Longbottoms appeared especially unnerved.

"But that's impossible," Alice protested softly to Frank. "How are we supposed to pretend to be happy when innocent Muggles have gone dead?"

"I probably ought to report to the office," Frank returned. "I haven't been officially called yet, but considering... the Ministry will need all the Aurors they can get."

After their exchange, the couple approached Severus and Lily.

"We're going to head out," Alice explained. Taking Lily's hands and giving them a reassuring squeeze, the slightly older woman continued, "But I wanted to express my congratulations to the both of you again. We will have many baby stories to share in a few months' time."

Giving Alice a watery smile, Lily replied, "Thank you."

"Well, good bye, then," Frank said. "We'll say good luck to the Potters and be off."

"Good bye," Severus said quietly, sighing as the Longbottoms left. He looked at Lily, asking, "How are you holding up?"

"Still feeling a bit queasy, but nothing serious," she replied.

Severus wanted to tell Lily that the Longbottoms made a good point - that it was next to impossible to celebrate when the war had just escalated, but he didn't want to dampen her spirits. Despite his feelings otherwise, Severus kept quiet and forced himself to stay a couple of more hours.

The party never really felt right, though.

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Much later that day, when night had fallen, a young man ran panting through the forest. His black robe caught on a tree branch, ripping it, and he cursed, pulling the damn thing free. In his anxiety and frustration, his hood had blown down, as the wind seemed to be picking up, revealing dark hair that framed his face wildly. He appeared slightly mad.

"Ridiculous," he muttered. "Why did I ever think- ? What did I think- ?"

He was rendered speechless as a jagged bolt of what looked like lightning hit the ground, and he visibly jumped, retreating some into the shadows.

"Please, don't hurt me!" the young man called out in desperation.

"That was not my intention," came the reply. Dumbledore raised his hand, and the branches stilled. The wind seemed to abate.

"Now," Dumbledore said, "what might a Death Eater request from me? Do you come bringing your master's latest threats, such as his reasons for destroying an important Muggle building and killing countless innocents?"

"N-no," Regulus stuttered, wringing his hands. "I had nothing to do with what happened today, I swear it! I was... otherwise occupied."

"Indeed?" Dumbledore inquired smoothly. "What is it you wish to tell me, Regulus?"

Regulus reached for his pocket. If Dumbledore thought the young man might pull out his wand, he didn't make any move to defend himself. Instead of a wand, though, Regulus's trembling hand held up a heavy gold locket on a chain.

Dumbledore recognized the item from Bob Ogden's memory, the same memory that had revealed the ring to him. His bushy white eyebrows were raised.

"Take it," Regulus offered.

"Do you think me a fool?" Dumbledore asked, more harshly than he intended.

Regulus recoiled. "It... it won't hurt you, so long as you don't put it on, I think."

"How did you come by this?" Dumbledore persisted. "Since you are bringing it to me, I assume you have your reasons?"

"Yes," Regulus readily replied. "It's a Horcrux. I've figured out his secret. He's splitting his soul and putting parts of it into different items."

Dumbledore didn't let on that he already knew about the Horcruxes. He wasn't about to trust Regulus, should the boy go running back to his master.

"Interesting," Dumbledore pretended to muse. "And how did you come by this... Horcrux?"

"Two days ago, the Dark Lord requested a house elf, so he asked me for Kreacher, my family's elf. I was more than ready to give him what he wanted. When Kreacher didn't return for a day, I grew suspicious and concerned. Kreacher was always loyal to my family, to me especially... and most definitely not to my idiot brother, but anyway... I finally called for him, and he returned to me, as he is bound to obey

me. I asked him where he'd gone, and he told me how the Dark Lord had taken him to a cave, how he had a locket to hide, thus making poor Kreacher drink some sort of potion that made him see horrible visions, and the Dark Lord left Kreacher there to die! Had I not called him, he would have died. I demanded he take me to this cave. Kreacher didn't want to, but he obeyed without question. I exchanged the locket and drank the potion... and I saw... I... It was horrible!" Regulus's voice was shaking, but he forced himself to continue on.

"I was dreadfully thirsty after downing the whole basin of potion that protected the locket. I demanded water, and Kreacher reached in the lake surrounding us... only for an army of Inferi to come at us. I would have died had Kreacher not taken me out with him."

"I see," Dumbledore said, very interested in Regulus's tale, but keeping his tone and face impassive. "And why have you come to me?"

"I requested to see you, sir, because... because you gave me the benefit of the doubt before... during my last year at school."

"That seemed rather foolish of me, looking back," Dumbledore bit out. "You seemed genuinely remorseful, only you chose to go down the path of so many others from your house. What has changed now, Regulus?"

"He used Kreacher! He used an innocent, defenseless house elf!" Regulus shouted. "For the first time..." His breathing was shallow, so it took a few breaths for Regulus to calm. "For the first time, I finally realized what a twisted bastard he is. What I saw when I drank that potion were my worst nightmares. I saw Kreacher, frightened and alone, almost dying as Inferi pulled him into the lake. The point is, if he was willing to do that to a house elf, how else is he willing to do? I thought joining him would be about honor and power, but that's not true. He's got us following him like a load of worthless slaves... servants." Regulus crinkled his nose distastefully. "Some are more than happy to help, to simper at his feet... Lucius Malfoy... my cousin Bellatrix. He's given them special treatment. I thought I was to be selected for the same special treatment, but all he needed from me was my house elf... for his damned Horcrux."

Hearing the bitterness in Regulus's voice, Dumbledore wondered if some of the boy's hesitation had been genuine in the past. Had Severus swayed Regulus just enough a couple of years earlier to keep him from truly becoming completely Dark?

"You have given me a lot of information," Dumbledore stated, "and for that, I thank you, but the question begs, Regulus: Where do you wish to go from here?"

"I... I want out," Regulus whispered, "but that's impossible. Once branded, it's servitude or death."

"Ah, not necessarily," Dumbledore said. "There are other options, but I must be sure that you are truly being honest with me. I would therefore ask, Regulus, that you take the Unbreakable Vow should you wish to serve me instead."

"The Unbreakable Vow?" gasped Regulus. "That's-"

"That's my final offer," Dumbledore stated firmly. "We will need a Bonder, of course, but my brother is but a mile away in the village, and I believe you already had the pleasure of meeting Aberforth when you overheard the prophecy."

"You're a shrewd and ruthless old man," Regulus observed. "I can see why the Dark Lord fears you."

"This is a war, Regulus, and I have lived a long time. I know a thing or two about strategy, and I am no fool."

"All right," Regulus agreed, taking a shaky breath. "I'll do it."

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Miles away, had Severus known Regulus was now in his previous life's position, he would have blanched. Instead, he was, for the time, safely in his house with his wife and their unborn child.

Lily was lying across his lap as he stared into the fire.

"Sev?" she asked, her voice sleepy.

"Yeah?"

"What if the Statute of Secrecy was broken today?"

"Then we're in a hell of a lot of trouble," Severus sighed warily.

Chapter One Hundred-Five

Any question over whether the Statute for Secrecy had been broken was answered the following morning. What should have been a quiet Sunday morning was instead filled with a mixture of disbelief, outrage, shock, and fear. The Muggle news media were covering the previous evening's attack on the Parliament building, eyewitnesses and footage from cameras verifying that around seven o'clock, a group of people wearing black robes and white masks had suddenly appeared out of thin air and withdrawn what looked like plain wooden sticks from their pockets... before all hell had broken loose.

At first, the government tried to link this strange attack to one of the terrorist groups, hoping for a rational explanation. Surely it had to be a trick of the eye what they were seeing. Maybe this group was using advanced technology that the average person simply wasn't privy to. Unfortunately, after hours of wild discussion and the already growing panic in the public, the news stories came out, televisions showing footage from the attack itself, interviews of people who had been nearby, the newspapers awash with photos.

Without electricity at Spinner's End, Severus and Lily weren't among the population tuned into their telly that morning. However, it wasn't a surprise when a knock came from the door while they were still eating breakfast.

Lily stood and opened it, seeing her entire family standing there, including Oliver.

"Is it true, then?" Violet asked without preamble. Her eyes were large with fear.

Motioning for them to enter, Lily stepped aside. Closing the door and grateful for the privacy their home afforded them from the rest of the world who didn't know of their location, Lily nodded.

"We heard the news yesterday, but didn't know if the Muggle government would find out the truth... that it would become public knowledge," Lily said grimly, "but we had a bad feeling it would."

From the table, Severus set his cup of coffee down and stood, going to Lily's family. "What are they saying?" he asked.

"It's all over the telly," Ross explained. "I turned it on not more than a half-hour ago to watch the usual morning news, and there it was, plain as day. Of course, we already knew about Parliament being destroyed last night from the nightly news, but it was still assumed to be terrorists at that time."

"They had to have known the truth from the moment it happened," Severus replied, shaking his head. "They would have tried to find another explanation, of course, and the wizarding government would've tried to cover it up, but it would appear they were unsuccessful. This isn't the first time wizards have done magic in front of Muggles, but this is the first time it's been this out of control."

Severus stopped speaking, wondering what this would mean for the wizarding world. Voldemort had never gone this far before, which was rather surprising, all things considered. His eyes briefly met Oliver's. The boy had remained silent thus far, his eyes large with fear and uncertainty.

Petunia was biting her lip nervously, as if frightened, but also trying to keep from saying something cutting. Lily's eyes locked with her sister's, and finally, Petunia burst out, "I should've known your kind would do something like this! They have magic, and they're dangerous! Anyone with that much power can't be trusted!"

Taken aback, Lily replied, hurt, "Petunia, you don't mean that."

"But I do!" Petunia exclaimed, her expression frenzied. Tossing up her hands, she demanded, "And now what are we supposed to do?"

"Petunia, really," Violet gently admonished.

"That is a good question, though," Ross pointed out. "What are we going to do? What's to happen now?" He gazed imploringly at Lily and Severus, as if expecting them to have a brilliant solution because they were magical.

"How should I know?" Lily asked hotly, annoyed by Petunia's attitude. "You think we're not already doing what we can?"

"I never said that," Ross replied carefully.

"I know that, Dad, but tell Petunia-" Lily started to argue, but Severus held up a hand, interrupting, "If I might... perhaps the lot of you ought to sit down, and we can discuss this rationally?"

Petunia snorted, shaking her head as she followed her family into the kitchen. They drew up chairs around the small table.

Before she sat, Lily asked, "Does anyone want tea or coffee? I assume you've had breakfast already, but there are still some eggs on the stove."

Petunia remained silent, and both of Lily's parents politely declined her offer. Oliver accepted a glass of orange juice and sat sipping it quietly, watching the adults and wondering where the conversation would go next. Sighing, Lily joined Severus and her family.

"So," Ross began slowly, "if what you say is the case, Severus, that this has never happened before, what does your Ministry plan on doing?"

"They normally send out teams of wizards called Obliviators to erase the memories of those who witness something they shouldn't," Severus explained, "like at our wedding last year when the Death Eaters attacked and your entire family saw them, but that is a much smaller scale. Surely you remember the attack in that Muggle pub earlier this year? It was the same thing. There weren't many people involved, so it was easier to contain. The Ministry of Magic would have tried the same tactic this time around, including erasing any other evidence, like recordings or photographs, but the scale of this attack was too large. V- Voldemort wanted to instill fear in the hearts of Muggles and wizards alike. He doesn't care how many people are killed in the process. If you understand nothing else about him, understand that he is ruthless. You're already being kept hidden by the Untraceable Charm for this reason."

"And we've been miserable," Petunia protested. "No one but you two and a few others from your world know we exist. I can't attend university. Dad can't go to work. It's been ridiculous being holed up in our house for the past year."

"You haven't been holed up the entire time," Lily pointed out. "You came over when we invited you, Petunia."

"Oh, how could I forget?" Petunia asked sarcastically. "That was months ago."

Violet sighed. "Girls, please... This isn't the time to be arguing." Looking at Severus and Lily, she added, "Don't think we aren't grateful for the protection you've afforded us; we are. We're just... worried."

"I know, Mum," Lily said gently, ashamed for arguing with Petunia. Even now, she wondered how Petunia and she could find something to row over.

"That still leaves us in the same predicament," Ross pointed out.

"We are already doing what we can," Severus spoke up. "Lily and I are fighting. That's all we can do."

To keep the larger truth from Lily's parents, that they were at a greater risk because of the prophecy, was difficult for both Severus and Lily. When Lily had shared the news of her pregnancy with her family a few days prior, they had been happy for them, pleased for some good news in these times. The conversation lulled, and when anxieties were placated for the time, Severus and Lily found themselves alone shortly thereafter.

"I'm surprised Dumbledore hasn't notified us," Lily stated.

"He's probably busy with the Ministry," Severus suggested. "He'll be contacting us by early afternoon at the latest."

"How can you be sure?" Lily questioned, raising her eyebrows.

"I've known that man for years in two lifetimes, Lily," Severus said dryly. "If I haven't figured him out by now, I don't suppose I will."

In spite of the gravity of the situation, Lily smiled at Severus remark.

As predicted, Dumbledore called shortly after lunch. When his head appeared in the fireplace, Severus had been reading and glanced up seemingly calmly from his book, but in all actuality, he was anything but calm.

"I assume you've heard?" Dumbledore inquired.

Severus gave a firm nod.

"There is a meeting tonight. Because of heightened security, we are meeting in my office at Hogwarts. Seven o'clock. Can I count on your and Lily's attendance?"

"Of course, sir."

Severus thought Dumbledore might bid him good day, but he remained another moment in the fire. "There is one other thing of vital importance. I have discovered another Horcrux... or more truthfully, someone else has discovered one and brought it to my attention."

Stunned by this news, Severus placed his book on the table and stood. "I want to see it," he stated.

Dumbledore understood Severus's meaning behind his simple statement. "Very well. Come through, then... of course, tell Lily first where you are going."

"She's coming with me this time," Severus said. "She needs to know as much information as possible."

Dumbledore nodded.

Severus was about to step out of the room to get Lily when she entered. Seeing Dumbledore, she said, "I overheard what you were saying. So, is it true, then, sir? Did you really find another Horcrux?"

"Yes, Lily," Dumbledore replied evenly. "I'll withdraw and allow you to pass through the connection. See you momentarily."

With those words, Dumbledore's head disappeared, leaving nothing but an empty fireplace. Severus and Lily exchanged looks. He took her hand and led her toward the fireplace, throwing some Floo Powder into the grate and announcing their destination.

After spinning through the Floo Network and passing numerous fireplaces, Severus and Lily stepped out into the headmaster's office, brushing soot off of their clothing. Getting his bearings, Severus's eyes came to rest on Dumbledore's desk, where he noticed a large gold locket. It appeared ancient and heavy.

"Is that it?" he asked, approaching said object.

"Indeed, it is," Dumbledore said. He picked it up, holding it for them to see. "It does not carry a curse on it like that ring. Touching it does not do physical harm, although..." he drifted off, thoughtful.

"Yes?" Severus prodded.

"Slipping the chain around one's neck brings with it a certain heaviness. Wearing it too long does seem to bring out the worst in a person. It feels nearly alive, like there's a beating heart inside. I've tried any number of spells to open it, but alas, nothing."

"You tried opening it?" Severus asked incredulously. "After I warned you not to put the ring on? Are you daft, old man?"

"Severus," Lily murmured, shocked by her husband's blunt manner.

Severus, however, didn't seem to hear Lily. Stepping closer to Dumbledore, he continued, "That's incredibly Dark Magic, Dumbledore. Would you care to plan your funeral now and have the arrangements in place, saving the Order the trouble for you?" he demanded, angry sarcasm lacing his words.

Dumbledore sighed and placed the locket back on his desk. "Perhaps I have acted foolishly," he muttered, "but forgive his old man for his shortness of memory."

Severus snorted. "Don't play stupid with me. Your memory is as quick and good as a young man's. Anyway, you said someone brought it to you. Who?"

"Regulus Black."

"What?!" Severus yelled.

"Do calm yourself, Severus. Yes, he came to me late last night and explained how he came by this Horcrux. He is now in my debt, as I have granted him protection when the time comes for the Death Eaters to be sentenced to Azkaban. He's been employed into my service to spy on Voldemort, a job someone has to do."

"And how will you trust him?" Severus demanded, sickened to realize that Regulus was now in his previous position. As much as he disliked the other boy, he wouldn't wish the spy's role upon anyone. Knowing Dumbledore like he did, Severus suspected that the old manipulator had used something to break Regulus, to force him into the position he wanted.

"He has taken the Unbreakable Vow. If he breaks it-"

"The Unbreakable Vow?" Lily asked in a small voice. "But if he breaks it-"

"He will die," Severus finished grimly. Shaking his head at Dumbledore, he wished to hurl back the headmaster's words toward him from another lifetime.

You disgust me.

"Well, be that what it will," Dumbledore cut in frankly, "I felt you ought to know about the Horcrux. We now have two in our possession, so we are on the right road to success... in one respect, anyway. The attack on the Muggle Parliament and the breaking of the Statute for

Secrecy pose a larger threat, a bigger problem, but that is for tonight's meeting." Pausing, Dumbledore passed his eyes from Lily to Severus, adding, "And I believe congratulations are in order."

"Th-thank you, sir," Lily said in a carefully controlled voice, wishing to leave.

Severus, however, had none of his wife's patience or cold politeness in that moment. Sneering at Dumbledore, he muttered, "Well, I hope you're happy, old man."

He turned his back on Dumbledore and took Lily by the hand, leading her out of the office through the fireplace.

Chapter One Hundred-Six

Severus was sitting in the armchair in the living room, his right elbow resting on the arm, his hand meeting his forehead as he slumped forward slightly, thinking. Upon returning to Spinner's End a few minutes ago, Lily had announced she was going to take a bath, something she often did when she wanted to get her mind off things.

That left Severus in his current position, his thoughts all too consuming. He knew he would be facing the reality of the war in a few short hours when his presence was required at the Order meeting. He would be occupying the same room as Dumbledore, the man who had made his life miserable and who had been merciful at the same time.

Allowing his arm to drop, Severus released a heavy sigh. He supposed he should have been more upset about the breach on the Statute of Secrecy, but for him, what grated on his nerves the most was always personal. The war had its larger meaning, but for him, both the first time and now, his involvement in this war was highly personal.

Was that why he had been so angry at Dumbledore? For putting another young man in the position of spy, a position only he could understand?

As if it weren't bad enough that Regulus were the trusty spy - if he could be trusted... Severus didn't much care for the other boy, but Regulus had shown some promise, some remorse... or was it only fear that drove him away from the Dark Lord?

In the end, Severus knew that Regulus's story hadn't been the same as his own. It, in and of itself, hadn't been enough to convince the shrewd old headmaster of his regret.

An Unbreakable Vow, though? Narcissa asked if of me out of desperation, and I foolishly consented. Surely Dumbledore didn't ask with the same motivation. Desperation was never his angle. No, Dumbledore was always too manipulative and cunning for that. His remark about sorting too soon could have just as well applied to him.

Severus was taken out of his reverie when he heard the tub draining. Lily's footsteps shortly followed, and Severus glanced at the clock. His eyes drifted to the framed picture next to the clock on the mantle, and he stood, going to it and taking it in his hands. He reverently stroked the frame, running a finger over the picture next, seeing Lily so happy in her wedding dress. Beside her, Severus almost didn't recognize himself, for he was beaming as well, something he often didn't do.

At least there's one good thing about today, he thought fondly. I've been married to Lily for a year.

Not realizing he must have lost himself in gazing at the photo, Lily came from behind, snaking her arms around his slim torso. She peeked around his shoulder to see the picture and smiled.

"Can you believe it?" she asked.

"Mmm," Severus replied, returning the frame to its original spot. Turning around, he embraced her and planted a kiss on the top of her head.

"Are you all right?" Lily whispered, searching his eyes, so fathomless, so deep.

"I will be," Severus said softly. "I'm sorry about my display earlier... in Dumbledore's office."

"Dumbledore does seem to have a rather negative effect on you, doesn't he? Well, I don't blame you, Sev. He is manipulative, but I think he knows what he's doing."

"Oh, he definitely knows what he's doing," Severus remarked darkly. "He always knew what he was doing, what he was setting up - or more specifically, who he was setting up. He knew they would fall right into place in his grand plan."

"And you've had enough of those games," Lily stated as fact.

"Precisely." Severus sank into the sofa, and Lily joined him.

"Well... I just hope his plans work. This meeting is going to be long and complicated tonight, I just know it."

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After a dull dinner and a lapse in conversation, for neither Lily nor Severus seemed to want to talk about the topic that would be discussed ad nauseam tonight during the meeting, they briefly cleaned up the kitchen and headed into the sitting room. Severus went for the fireplace and extracted a handful of Floo Powder from the clay jar on the mantel. He threw the greyish substance into the grate, announcing, "Dumbledore's office," his voice neither loud nor with much vigor.

Stepping into the round office, Severus observed many Order members already present. Edgar Bones was in the process of muttering over some documents with Frank Longbottom, and Caradoc Dearborn was pacing, lost in worry and thought. Dumbledore was seated behind his desk, exchanging words with his brother, Aberforth, and his lifelong friend, Elphias Doge. His blue eyes briefly met Severus's when the young man entered, but Severus quickly diverted his gaze, placing a hand on Lily's back as he guided her to some empty chairs away from the others.

"How are you feeling?" he asked in a low voice.

"The nausea hasn't been as bad today," Lily returned softly. "Just the one time this morning, as you know. Hopefully I can make it through this meeting fine."

Severus nodded, hoping for the same. Just then, the fire admitted more people, including the Marauders and Mary. Severus kept the sigh that wanted to escape from surfacing as they joined Lily and himself.

Great, a time for small talk, Severus thought sourly.

"How was the rest of your wedding day?" Lily inquired kindly.

"It was as well as could be expected," Mary replied, her usual gushiness gone. "Of course, we didn't go on our honeymoon, obviously, seeing as we're here..."

"Seeing as the Muggle Parliament was destroyed," James cut in, "yeah." His normally smiling face was drawn and serious. "Unbelievable," he muttered. "Those bastards."

Ten more minutes passed, and once everyone was assembled, Dumbledore ended his conversation with Aberforth and Elphias and turned his attention to commencing the meeting. Standing, he announced, "By now, you all have heard the news - that the Muggle Parliament has been destroyed. Even worse, the Statute of Secrecy has been broken, meaning that Muggles all over Britain are now aware of the presence of witches and wizards. It won't take long for this news to spread throughout the world. The ramifications of this are yet to be determined."

A few murmurs were exchanged between the Order members, but Dumbledore continued, "You may notice that one of our number is missing. It is with great sadness that I inform you all that Benjy Fenwick is dead. He was near Parliament when the attack happened and didn't make it out with his life. Only his hand, still clutching his wand, was found."

Gasps of horror came from several of the women. Severus shook his head. There was no way he could have known how the man would die, especially since so many events had been altered.

"What does all this mean?" asked Marlene McKinnon quietly, her eyes shining with unshed tears, but a firm resolve on her face in the way she set her mouth. "What is You-Know-Who's tactic, do you think?"

"Tactic?" barked Mad-Eye Moody with a bitter laugh. "The sodding bastard doesn't need any tactic, any strategy. He's enjoying the feeling of what he thinks he has in his grasp - unlimited power."

"Voldemort underestimates his foes," Dumbledore interrupted patiently. "By making himself known to Muggles, it was in hopes of

inspiring fear, and although that may be the case, those who are oppressed are the same people an evil overlord like Voldemort needs to fear. It was bad enough when he targeted Muggleborns, but by targeting Muggles so openly, he has made himself a powerful enemy, and his pride blinds him from realizing it. Muggles have come a long way in the past hundred years with their technological advances. They may not have magic, but they have weapons that could utterly wipe out entire populations in a matter of minutes. If we thought things were scary in the Middle Ages during the burnings, we have much more reason to be afraid now."

"But many of these so-called burnings were of their own kind," Frank reasonably pointed out. "They had a hard time telling the difference between a real witch or wizard and a fake one. Real ones could laugh during the burnings, so are we truly to be so afraid of what the Muggles could do to our kind?"

"If you aren't afraid, you should be," Dumbledore stated gravely. "We cannot hope to contain this information to this country, even. There is no spell in existence powerful enough to wipe the minds of masses of people. I am afraid that we will need to be more careful than ever to hide ourselves."

"And if we have to attack Death Eaters in public?" Severus suddenly demanded.

"We had better hope we're able to contain those Muggles who might witness it and Oblivate them afterward," replied Dumbledore.

"But a couple of Muggles aren't a real threat to us in a situation like that," Sirius pointed out.

"Yes, but they could become a problem should they run to the right authorities and report what they saw," Dumbledore countered.

Sirius was silenced, having to concede Dumbledore's remark.

"This is all well and good," Moody said sarcastically, "but why didn't we know this attack would happen? Surely something of this magnitude should have been leaked in the daily goings-on in the

Ministry. We've got Aurors and people working at the Ministry who are supposed to be on the alert for this kind of thing. I, myself, didn't hear a bloody thing."

"That's what scares me, too, Alastor," Edgar commented. "No one expected this."

"But he didn't make any moves for months," Severus said impatiently. "Surely you didn't think he'd just given up? He was planning something big this entire time, and we were lazy. We weren't doing all we could have done to prevent it."

Damn and blast. I could've done something. What good is it reliving my bloody life if I couldn't have stopped something like this from happening? I was a fool to have just let things happen. It's been Horcruxes and the Prophecy that have been on my mind...

Severus's mind was attacked with stabbing realization that his anger toward Dumbledore and the rest of the Order was directed at himself, at his own shortcomings... or so he viewed them that way. Again and again, he found himself in a tangled web of his own making, his personal problems coming first, and here he had vowed to be a changed man!

He wanted to laugh mockingly and point his fingers in on himself, but when he forced his eyes to meet those of the others in the room, he found only sadness staring back.

No accusation.

Even Dumbledore and Lily, who knew the truth about Severus, were saddened, probably more so than the others.

"We all wish that," Marlene whispered.

Many people nodded solemnly.

But you don't understand, Severus wanted to protest aloud. You don't know what else he's doing, trying to keep himself immortal, finding a way to interpret the Prophecy...

"Be all that as it may," Dumbledore resumed the topic, "we cannot undo what has already been done. We must work with what we have. I am pleased to announce one piece of good news - we now have a spy implemented in the Death Eaters' ranks."

"A spy?" Dearborn questioned incredulously. "And you trust this individual? How did this come to pass?"

"He came to me only last night with valuable information on Voldemort, although I do not think it necessary to be discussing said information here. It pertains to a small number of people, and the fewer people who know about it, the better."

"So, you're saying you don't trust us, yet you trust this spy of yours?" asked Sirius roughly, his normally large eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"It is not so simple, Sirius," Dumbledore replied patiently, "but I believe this individual will provide us with valuable information, something we didn't have before. It will help us to avoid another incident like last night."

"So, what do we do next?" asked Remus. "What's the exact plan for prohibiting further attacks, whether large or small?"

"We will carry on doing our respective duties as we have been, and we are all to be extra cautious when in public as to not reveal our true identities. Edgar and Alastor have been tracking a few suspected Death Eaters. When I receive word, I will call on you. The purpose of this meeting was mostly informative-

"But it hasn't been completely so," argued Dorcas Meadows, speaking up for the first time. "Rumors have been flying about, rumors about a Prophecy, about someone who will be marked to defeat You-Know-Who. You haven't mentioned this, Dumbledore. What do you know about this?"

Dumbledore surveyed the middle-aged, stately woman over his half-moon spectacles, and then turned his attention to the room at large. Severus knew the old man would lie before he even opened his

mouth. Staring at Severus and Lily as he spoke, he said evenly, "I have heard the rumors myself, but know nothing more than any of you."

"You already said you had information you couldn't share with everyone," Sirius spoke up. "You're keeping the identity of your spy from us, what he brought you, and more. I think you know, Dumbledore."

Severus noticed that Sirius seemed quite incensed. He wasn't surprised that Dumbledore didn't reveal more to the Order and was truthfully quite grateful that the old man hadn't told everyone about the Prophecy and who it meant. Neither was he shocked that Dumbledore remained tight-lipped about his spy. No one in the Order had been aware of Severus's duties as a spy during the first war, not until after the Dark Lord had attacked the Potters.

"That will be quite enough, Sirius," Dumbledore said firmly. "We will be meeting on a weekly basis from here on out, as to keep in more regular contact about the goings-on. We will also be meeting in my office from now on. With that, I will see you all here next week, same time, same place."

Taking that as their dismissal, many of the people stood and said their farewells, although none too pleased about the predicament they were now facing. Severus and Lily were among the last people to leave, and Severus noticed that Sirius was still there with his friends.

"Sev," Lily whispered, "come on."

A part of Severus wanted to hang back, wondering what Sirius would ask Dumbledore, if he knew the spy was Regulus, but he knew that he couldn't stay and hear anything. He nodded followed Lily through the fireplace.

Alone with James, Sirius, Remus, and Mary now, Dumbledore raised his eyebrows from across the room at them. "Good evening to you all," he said, in hopes that they would join their fellows in leaving.

"Go on ahead of me," Sirius murmured to his friends. "I'll just be a minute."

"Are you sure, mate?" James asked, concerned for his friend.

"Come on, James," Remus muttered. Looking at Sirius, he added, "Don't be long, okay?"

"I won't be."

With that, James, Mary, and Remus exited. Alone with his former headmaster now, Sirius stepped closer to Dumbledore.

"The spy is Regulus, isn't it?" he asked.

Dumbledore kept his face impassive. "Sirius-"

"No, don't lie to me!" Sirius yelled, suddenly enraged. "I have a right to know! He's my brother!"

Sighing, Dumbledore posed, "What makes you so sure he's the spy?"

"Because I- I know him," Sirius stammered, his voice losing its edge. "He may have been a little shit most of the time, but I saw the way he was in school. He was scared, Dumbledore, scared when he took the mark. He didn't know what he was getting himself into. It's a miracle he hasn't gotten himself killed yet. What's more is I remember when one of the Death Eaters only Stunned and didn't kill Lily's father at her wedding last year. I had a feeling then that it was Regulus..."

"And you think I would protect him from death?" Dumbledore asked.

"If he agreed to spy for you, yes. Look, I don't know what he told you or what he gave you to convince you that he was having second thoughts, but I think he would've meant it. Just... look out for him, okay? He'd never believe me if I told him that-"

"That you still care for him?"

Sirius's grey eyes were glassy, but he nodded silently. "Just don't let anything bad happen to him, Dumbledore."

Dumbledore was silent. He had never openly admitted that the spy was Regulus, but without the exact words, each man came to an understanding between them that night.

Meanwhile, back at Spinner's End, Severus's head was spinning as he tried to reconcile his newfound guilt with the events around him.

Chapter One Hundred-Seven

Although the Statute of Secrecy had been broken, the Muggle population was split on whether it believed in the existence of wizards and magic. Over the centuries, Muggles had glimpsed magic on occasion, but it was mostly dismissed as tricks, lies, and fairytales. Even now, with headlines running in the papers, including less reliable sources, most turned their noses up at such ridiculous claims of their being a whole society of magical people capable of unimaginable feats. The attack on Parliament being attributed to wizards was laughable by many, and they would much rather blame terrorist groups and continue to live in their denial instead of facing the facts, which seemed convoluted.

Despite the majority of Muggles disbelieving in magic, the wizarding community was still taking precautions to not be recognized. Voldemort didn't hold back in his attacks, either. Although he had yet to strike on such a large scale again as Parliament, he was reveling in the free reign he thought he possessed.

September was a particularly rough month. The Order increased its efforts to fight the Death Eaters, and several battles resulted in bloody aftermaths. The death tolls were growing on both sides, and new recruits were coming into the Order and the Death Eaters by the week. The war was now on a larger scale than Severus had ever remembered it being the first time.

By the time October came, Severus wondered how much longer the war would endure. He had hoped earlier for it to end before another two years passed... and Lily died again. Any previous knowledge he had at his disposal was no longer valuable. Events were so drastically changed this time around, he couldn't know who would die or when or where the next attack would take place.

He turned his attention to trying to figure out the two remaining unknown Horcruxes. The diary, he knew, resided with Lucius Malfoy, and a raid on Malfoy Manor was in the process of being planned as he sat at his bench in the basement of Spinner's End and worked on more healing potions for the Order. It wouldn't do much good to have

all the Horcruxes in their possession without being able to destroy them, however.

If only there was a potion that could destroy Horcruxes. They're made with really Dark Magic; it would take equally powerful magic to destroy them.

Severus sighed, hating his predicament. He felt like they hadn't budged in months.

A creak issued forth from the stairs, and Severus was removed from his thoughts as his dark eyes drifted to the steps. He saw Lily descending them, her belly just starting to show. He watched as she gripped the railing to right herself, pausing before continuing down the stairs.

"How are things going down here?" she asked when she reached Severus.

"Fine," Severus murmured. "Nothing special. Just the usual routine healing salves. Are you okay?"

Placing a hand on her stomach, Lily smiled. "I'm fine, Sev. The morning sickness isn't as bad these days." Her eyes met his. "You've been worrying again."

Shaking his head, he set down the knife he had been using to chop ingredients and checked on the cauldron. "It's nothing new, but then again, nothing is new anymore, is it? I'll be glad when we make that raid on Malfoy's house. At least that will be accomplishing something."

"When do you think it'll happen?"

"Hopefully this weekend. There was talk of the Malfoys being away. Lucius has recently married Narcissa Black, you know."

"I heard she was pregnant as well," Lily pointed out. "They certainly didn't waste any time."

Severus's mouth quirked. "That was how it was last time, too." He had still been friends with Lucius back then. He remembered rather fondly holding baby Draco.

"You're smiling," Lily observed, curious.

"I was just remembering something," Severus replied. "The Malfoys had a son... Draco. I was his godfather. The boy was always fond of me, and despite my cutting ties with the Dark Lord, the Malfoys were still akin to friends to me."

"But they were... are evil, Severus. How could you be friends with people like that?"

Severus's smile faded. "'People like that', Lily? You cannot divide people into simple categories of 'good' and 'evil.' Do you forget my past? Do you think that darkness still doesn't reside somewhere inside of me? Even when I was working for Dumbledore all those years and protecting your son, Harry Potter, I took a certain pleasure in humiliating the kid. Hindsight has since given me a different and better perspective, but I did not have any feelings of true concern for your son. When I killed Dumbledore, you could say my hand was forced, but I had to feel enough hatred for the man to do it. The truth is, Lily, I still harbor a certain amount of loathing toward him, and not just for asking such a task of me. The Malfoys may not have been 'good people' like you, but they knew how to love. They loved each other and their son. In the end of the second war, I do not think they wanted to be a part of the Dark Lord's team anymore. It was fear and self-preservation that was driving them, but they had a change of heart nonetheless. Most of our actions are done for at least partly selfish reasons. My own have largely been so in the past and are partially so even now."

"You aren't selfish, Severus," Lily argued. "What you did, everything you sacrificed... you did it for me, you said."

"Yes, always for you, Lily, but back then, my love didn't extend beyond you as it does now."

"I don't think that's true. To have wound up giving your life in the end had to have taken enormous courage. That kind of sacrifice is selfless. Your reasons may have started out being driven by selfish motivation, but I think you do yourself a disservice in believing that you didn't grow past that."

Severus looked away, uncomfortable under Lily's scrutiny. She had the uncanny ability to see the best in people.

"Enough about me and my past," Severus said, closing the subject. "All this talk won't bring us any closer to winning this war."

Stunned and hurt by her husband's sudden hardening, Lily nodded, keeping her lip from trembling. "You've been working too hard," she whispered. "Come upstairs, Severus."

"I have work that needs to be done, Lily. I am... sorry." He stared at the rough and worn wood of the bench, wishing he had the courage to throw aside his burden and take her into his arms.

Severus felt a soft hand pressed onto his back briefly before he heard the rustle of Lily turning and moving away.

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While Severus and Lily were at home having a discussion in their basement, Dumbledore was sitting at his desk at Hogwarts. He had been nursing a growing headache all day and had refused a potion for it, saying it would make him feel drowsy, and he needed to be awake for the important meeting he had that evening.

Right on time, the flames in the fireplace turned green and admitted Regulus Black. The young man stepped out of the fireplace, brushing soot from his fine clothes, his face taking on a haughty expression.

"Good evening, Regulus," Dumbledore cordially greeted him, indicating that the young man ought to sit.

Regulus took the proffered seat. Without greeting, he stated, "Everything is in place."

"Excellent," replied Dumbledore, smiling. "You have done extremely well, Regulus. You are certain that you know the layout of your cousin's house well enough and that we have the cooperation of the house elves?"

"Yes, sir," Regulus said, moving to the edge of his seat. "If I might be so bold, could I join you?"

Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully, considering Regulus's request. The boy did know about Horcruxes, after all, and he had been vital in helping to arrange this raid on Malfoy Manor.

"You would need to be disguised, of course. We cannot take a large group into the manor. It would need to be someone who isn't going."

"What about my brother?" suggested Regulus.

"Sirius may want to go on the mission."

"But I already have some of his hair saved up. It wasn't hard, what with growing up in the same house together, to procure a sample or two. He hasn't occupied his old room in a couple of years, so I could easily enter and take what I needed."

"I will let you know in a couple of days' time," Dumbledore replied.

Regulus's expression was a bit too eager for Dumbledore's liking, but remembering Sirius's plea to protect his only brother, Dumbledore mostly wanted the younger Black sibling to hang back, if only for his safety.

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Much to Lily's dismay, she had to remain behind when the raid occurred three days later. Severus was asked personally by Dumbledore if he would like to be a part of the mission, and he leapt to the call. Dumbledore explained that Sirius Black and Edgar Bones would also be joining them.

When asked to report to the headmaster's office that evening, Severus was curious to know the plan. He wasn't sure how Dumbledore intended to infiltrate Malfoy Manor without being caught. The Malfoys would have their home protected with wards to prevent wizards from merely Apparating in.

When Severus stepped into Dumbledore's office, the other two men were already present. Sirius had an odd expression on his face, seemingly eager to participate in this raid. Severus suspected the other man wanted to do anything he could to help take down his relatives.

"There is a diary we will need to procure," Dumbledore began explaining once Severus joined them. When Edgar gave the headmaster a curious look, Dumbledore didn't elaborate. Severus thought it strange that Sirius didn't appear equally confused.

"What's so important about a ruddy diary?" asked Edgar impatiently.

"We don't have time to be discussing that right now," Dumbledore replied. "The point is, we need to be in and out as quickly as possible. The house elves have agreed to cooperate with us-"

"I thought they were bound to serve their masters?" interrupted Severus.

"Ah, but you see, we already have one elf who is ready to assist us. Sirius's old elf, Kreacher, is ready to be called, and one of the Malfoys' elves, Dobby, is especially unhappy with his conditions and mistreatment at the hands of his masters. In fact... why don't you call them... Sirius?"

Severus frowned, wondering why Kreacher would listen to Sirius. He remembered the bitter, old house elf who lived in Grimmauld Place, and he didn't seem to like Sirius very much. Sirius returned the lack of affection. As for Dobby, Severus wasn't surprised to hear that particular elf was willing to disobey his masters.

"All right," Sirius replied. "Kreacher! Dobby!"

In a loud pop, two house elves appeared in front of them. Kreacher glared at Sirius, but Dobby appeared anxious, yet ready to serve.

"Kreacher has staked out the Malfoy house," Kreacher said in his bullfrog voice. "Kreacher did his master's bidding and found the room where they keep their precious things."

"Dobby is ready, sirs!" Dobby exclaimed enthusiastically. "Dobby has been in the room before, but Dobby doesn't know exactly where the diary is being found there."

"Very good," Dumbledore told the elves, smiling. "Two of us will be Apparating into the Malfoy house by an elf each. Their magic is undetected by the wards."

Severus raised his eyebrows. Well, that is certainly an advantage. Voldemort and his followers alike have underestimated the elves' power. Gazing at Sirius, Severus wondered, But I still can't understand why Kreacher is so ready to listen to Black, unless... he's not really Sirius Black.

Sirius noticed Severus's eyes resting on him, and he glowered at him. Before either young man could utter a word, however, Dumbledore said, "On with the plan, then. Edgar, you may go with Severus. I will accompany Sirius. First, we will Disillusion ourselves." Dumbledore waved his wand over the others, taking care of the spell for them.

Edgar gave the headmaster a nod. Figuring Kreacher would opt to go with his master, he approached Dobby. "Are you ready?"

"Of course, sir," Dobby replied. "Just grab a hold of Dobby's shoulder. You, too, young sir," Dobby said, looking up at Severus.

Severus nodded, careful not to grab Dobby too tightly. He had heard of from Bellatrix how she had stabbed the poor creature with a knife, killing him. The little elf was braver than most wizards Severus knew, and more loyal, too.

A moment later, Severus was taken from his thoughts as he arrived in the basement of Malfoy Manor. The basement resembled a smaller

version of the dungeons at Hogwarts. Edgar was looking around, his wand held aloft in suspicion as they made their way down the hall. In all his visits to the house, Severus had rarely entered the basement. He recognized the cellar, the place where Voldemort had kept various prisoners during the second war. They made a turn and saw Dumbledore with Sirius and Kreacher.

Taking the lead, Dobby whispered, "This way. We house elves is knowing how to enter the room, but we couldn't Apparate directly in."

Walking next to Sirius, Severus hissed into his ear, "You're not him, are you?"

Sirius glared at Severus. "What are you talking about, Snape?"

"Shh," Dumbledore admonished.

The two young men were silenced, not wishing to draw attention. Coming upon the door, Dobby brought his hand up and waved it, as if he had a wand. He didn't utter a single word, and then the door opened. He motioned for the others to follow.

As soon as they were inside the room, Dumbledore cast several charms to keep others from overhearing them.

This is too easy, Severus thought nervously. His eyes kept darting around, looking for a sign of trouble.

Upon entering the room, the wizards lit their wands. Severus was shocked to see shelves lined with Dark objects, many of them probably cursed.

"Don't touch anything directly," Dumbledore instructed. "Remember, we are looking for a diary. Should you come across it, you ought to be able to touch it, however."

"How do you know it's not cursed like so many of these objects probably are?" questioned Edgar, eyeing the assortment of objects distastefully.

"That is not important," Dumbledore replied vaguely. "Let us begin. We need to move as quickly as possible."

Severus began surveying the shelves. The other wizards and Dobby were working diligently, although Kreacher seemed reluctant to help. After fifteen minutes, the room seemed to grow cooler, and Severus pulled his cloak closer.

"Is there a draft in here?" Edgar wondered aloud.

"I don't-" Severus started to say, but then his eyes fell upon an old book on the uppermost shelf.

"Accio diary," Severus muttered, but nothing happened.

"Did you find it?" asked Dumbledore.

Severus indicated the area above them. Dumbledore waved his wand, no doubt trying a more complicated spell that the younger wizards didn't know. Severus's eyes shifted to Sirius, whose eyes suddenly grew wide in fear. The other man wasn't looking at the others or even at the diary as it fell and landed with a dull thud on the ground.

"Be-behind you," Sirius croaked.

Severus wasn't the only one who felt something tingle and prickle on the back of his neck. A rattling sound issued forth from somewhere over by the door, and Severus felt a shudder run through him. He saw his mum's lifeless body hanging from the rafters, himself begging for help to protect Lily, himself collapsed in a chair and crying for the loss of her... all in his mind, of course. Those were horrible memories, and it was so cold... That could only mean come thing...

Severus turned around and saw it, the thing of nightmares. One scabbed, ugly hand was reaching for Sirius, who seemed plastered to the spot, his face betraying more fear than the rest of them. Dumbledore raised his wand, ready to cast a Patronus Charm, but then Severus was struck with a sudden revelation. Seeing the diary, the thing with a piece of Tom Riddle's soul, and seeing a thing that fed on souls...

"Wait!" Severus shouted.

He lunged for the diary, and picking it up, he tossed it directly at the Dementor. Under its hood, the thing's mouth sensed the diary, like a treat being thrown to a dog, and latched onto it. Sirius fled, hiding behind Dumbledore, watching in shock as the Dementor sucked the diary dry. A silvery essence left the book and entered the Dementor's mouth, and the diary fell to the floor.

Dumbledore exchanged a look of understanding with Severus and Edgar, leaving the two younger men to conjure Patronuses to drive the horrid creature from their midst. Simultaneously, Dumbledore returned the diary to its previous spot.

"Let's go," he instructed.

The Dementor was driven out by a silver doe and a silver groundhog, leaving the doorway clear for the four wizards and two elves to exit. Once in the hallway, the wizards grabbed hold of the elves, and the elves took them to safety. Once in Dumbledore's office, Severus watched, amazed and not surprised, as the Polyjuice wore off, revealing Sirius to really be Regulus. Kreacher released a loud exclamation of joy upon seeing his master and hugged his legs.

"Bloody hell!" Edgar exclaimed, rounding his wand immediately on the presumed Death Eater. "Dumbledore, what's he doing here? Did you know it was him?"

"Calm down, Edgar," Dumbledore said evenly. "Yes, I knew it was Regulus. Of course, he was supposed to be drinking the potion at regular intervals to ensure his identity remained a secret."

"Sorry," Regulus muttered sullenly, glaring at the others, "but that Dementor scared the living shit out of me!"

"Regardless," Dumbledore cut in, "I am glad to see that our mission was successful. Good thinking, Severus."

Edgar, thoroughly confused, glanced from one man to the other. "What was that thing... that diary?"

"That, my dear man, is not your concern." Realizing the implications of too much information being revealed to Edgar, Dumbledore asked Severus and Regulus to leave and wait for him in the adjacent room.

Regulus nodded, dismissing Kreacher and Dobby. Severus frowned, knowing what Dumbledore was about to do. He followed Regulus into the adjoining room and closed the door.

"He's going to Obliviate Bones," Severus stated. "He cannot risk too many people knowing about the Horcruxes."

"You mean... you know about them, too?" Regulus asked.

"Obviously," Severus stated. "And I know about you, Black. You're the spy."

Still unnerved by the Dementor incident, Regulus muttered, "Yeah, that's me, the spy. You don't need to worry, though, Snape. If I dare speak one word of this to the Dark Lord, it's my life. Dumbledore made me vow it."

Silence fell between them, then Regulus said, "Smart of you to think to give the Horcrux to a dementor."

Despite his wariness around the other man, Severus smirked. He had been successful in destroying a Horcrux.

The door opened a couple of minutes later, and Dumbledore beckoned them to come into the headmaster's office.

"He's gone," he said. "Good job, the both of you. I'm proud, truly proud." He beamed and offered them sherbert lemons, much to the two young Slytherins' eternal dismay.

Chapter One Hundred-Eight

After turning down sherbert lemons from the headmaster, Regulus and Severus were preparing to leave when Regulus's Dark Mark suddenly burned. Clutching his arm tightly, the pain shooting down his arm, he exchanged a concerned look with the other two men in the room.

"Do you think he suspects?" Regulus asked. "Would he know if the Horcrux has been destroyed?"

"I don't think so," Dumbledore replied. "That part of his soul was severed from the rest of him. You must go, though, Regulus. If he is calling, you had better not delay another moment."

Giving a quick nod, Regulus Flooed out of Dumbledore's office, gone in a flurry of robes and flame. Severus regarded Dumbledore in silence, waiting for the old wizard to speak.

"I must reiterate how proud I am of you, Severus. Your quick thinking both saved us from a potential dementor attack, and you have successfully destroyed a Horcrux."

"Thank you, sir," Severus replied, feeling rather good about his accomplishment. His mind, however, drifted to Regulus. "Is he... safe?"

"You mean Regulus?"

Severus nodded.

"As safe as he can be, I suppose," Dumbledore admitted. "I have been teaching him Occlumency, of course. He is not very high in Voldemort's ranks yet and so isn't privy to everything, but he is proving valuable."

Severus scowled. Yes, the valuable spy.

"Was there something you wished to discuss?" Dumbledore posed, feigning curiosity.

"Nothing beyond the obvious: that we can use dementors to destroy the Horcruxes and that I cannot help but be suspicious that Voldemort called a meeting right after the raid on the Malfoy house."

"The raid was successful, and as I said, I do not believe Voldemort would be aware his Horcrux has been destroyed. It is late, my boy. Surely Lily is up waiting for you..."

"Then good night, sir," Severus said, going toward the fireplace. He took a pinch of powder, and just as he threw it into the grate and announced his destination, he heard Dumbledore utter, "Good night, Severus."

Worn out from the evening, Severus was grateful to be stepping into the familiar surroundings of his sitting room. Lily was sitting on the sofa, a book clutched in her hands. The moment he entered, she placed it aside and stood, anxious to know how the raid had gone.

"It was a success," Severus said with a smile.

"That's wonderful!" Lily exclaimed. "So, what happened?"

"We found the diary with the help of house elves, and I had the idea on the verge of almost getting attacked by a dementor to feed the Horcrux to it. It worked."

"A dementor?" Lily asked, shocked. "What was a dementor doing there?"

"Probably guarding the Malfoys' sacred possessions," Severus assumed.

"Well, anyway... wow! That was brilliant thinking on your part, Sev!"

Lily was beaming, and Severus found she was more beautiful than ever. He gazed down at her slightly bulging belly, placing a hand there.

"And how is our baby doing?" he asked, grinning.

Lily's smaller hand covered his. "Just fine, Sev; just fine."

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The hour was either really late or really early, depending on how one interpreted it. While dawn was still a couple of hours away, lost in the night's early morning hours, Regulus returned to Dumbledore with news from the Death Eater meeting.

"I have mixed news," the young man said in way of greeting.

Dumbledore nodded, indicating for him to continue.

"Which would you prefer first?"

"I often find it is better to get the bad news out of the way first," Dumbledore said with a long sigh. He was feeling ever bit as exhausted as Regulus from the long night.

"The bad news is... the Dark Lord seems to know who the prophecy is targeting..." he trailed off, ashamed, blaming himself for bringing news of the prophecy to his master in the first place.

"And who does he think it means?" posed Dumbledore, already strongly suspecting, even knowing, the answer to that question.

"The Snapes," Regulus replied morosely. He looked like he wanted to inquire further, but Dumbledore held up a hand, silencing him.

"How did Voldemort come to this conclusion? Do you know?"

Swallowing nervously, Regulus stuttered, "I- I have no idea."

The young man felt a push on his mental barriers and knew that Dumbledore was surveying his mind for any lies or deceit. When the aged wizard seemed satisfied, he relented.

"Very well," Dumbledore sighed again, feeling his insides turn cold. The thought of having to inform Severus and Lily was not something he was looking forward to. Of course, he had assumed the prophecy

could only mean Severus and his unborn child, but Voldemort hadn't yet figured that part out at the time.

Dumbledore watched Regulus as he fidgeted in the chair, shifting his weight from one side to the other, obviously uncomfortable.

"Well, now that we have the bad part, let's hear the good news you bring me, Regulus," Dumbledore stated in an overly patient tone.

"My cousin, Bellatrix, has one of the Horcruxes in her possession. She was so proud, she told me, that the Dark Lord had entrusted her with one of his most precious treasures. I don't think she knew what it was, but apparently she was told to guard it, to keep it safe."

"That is interesting news," observed Dumbledore. "I assume she shared this information with you because you are her kin?"

"Most likely."

"She didn't happen to say what the item was, did she?" Dumbledore inquired, already having his own suspicion that it was either the Cup of Hufflepuff or something belonging to Ravenclaw. He had only recently managed to procure the memories of Hokey the house elf, showing a young Tom Riddle visiting Hepzibah Smith.

"No," Regulus replied, rubbing at his eyes. "Sir, if you don't mind, may I please go now? I haven't had a wink of sleep all night, and-"

"Of course, of course," Dumbledore said, waving the young man off. "Go rest up."

Regulus stood and made for the fireplace.

"You have done very well, my boy," Dumbledore told him, causing Regulus to stop in shock.

Turning to face the headmaster, Regulus murmured, "Th-thank you, sir."

Dumbledore gave him a small smile of acknowledgement, and Regulus stepped through the grate.

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Later that day after returning from work, Severus and Lily were going about their usual routine for dinner. Dumbledore's calling on them during the meal had become a fairly common occurrence, so Severus wasn't surprised when he heard the headmaster's voice coming from the sitting room.

Slightly annoyed at being interrupted, Severus stood, muttering to himself and telling Lily to remain where she was seated.

Stepping into the sitting room, Severus asked, "How many times are you going to interrupt our dinner, Dumbledore?"

"My apologies, Severus, but this is important. I wouldn't waste your time on frivolity."

Severus thought the truth otherwise, but kept from commenting. "You may as well step through," he said dryly, indicating for Dumbledore to be seated upon his arrival.

Dumbledore graciously acquiesced and entered Spinner's End. Seating himself comfortably on the couch, he stated, "Regulus visited early this morning with news about Voldemort."

"Did he know about the Horcrux being destroyed?" asked Severus anxiously, taking a seat in the armchair.

"No, fortunately, that was not a problem," Dumbledore began to explain. "What is troubling is that he has somehow figured out that the prophecy means you and your family, Severus."

Feeling his insides go cold, Severus tried, regardlessly, to keep his voice neutral as he replied, "I see." He paused, trying to grasp this newfound information. "And how did he find out?" he asked.

"I do not know," Dumbledore said, his brows creased with worry for the younger man sitting across from him, "but, Severus... are you okay?"

"Just- just give me a minute." Severus stood and exited the room. Finding Lily cleaning up in the kitchen, Severus stopped in his tracks.

Seeing the distraught expression on his visage, Lily halted what she was doing and crossed the room. "What's the matter, Sev?"

"Dumbledore just informed me that Voldemort knows who the prophecy is targeting... me and our child, of course. I don't know how he found out, but there you have it," Severus said softly.

Although his tone was controlled, Lily knew it was a deception. She could detect the slight waver, the disquiet on the verge of letting loose.

"Oh, Sev, I'm sorry," Lily murmured, remorseful and concerned. "I'll come with you." Taking his hand, which trembled a bit, Lily walked with her husband into the sitting room.

She perched herself on the arm of the chair Severus was occupying again, awaiting further news from Dumbledore.

"I trust Severus has told you?" he questioned.

"Yes," Lily replied, unconsciously placing a hand on her stomach, as if protecting the baby.

"You realize what this means, surely? You will need to be extra careful whenever leaving the house. In fact, I would discourage any unnecessary forays-

"Forays?" Severus asked indignantly. "We barely do anything but go to work and Order meetings and battles nowadays, anyway. I'm not going to simply hide in this house like a coward."

"Just be careful, both of you," Dumbledore warned. After a heavy silence, he added, "However, I do come bearing a bit of good news."

"Good news?" Lily asked auspiciously.

"Yes, good news," Dumbledore confirmed, smiling slightly. "Regulus was told by his cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange, that she is currently in possession of one of the Horcruxes, most likely the Cup of Hufflepuff or something belonging to Ravenclaw, which I do not know the identity of. She is unaware of its value and power, but Voldemort has entrusted her with its safekeeping."

"Excellent," Severus breathed, glad to know the whereabouts of the fourth Horcrux. "Once we find it, we've only one left to go, and since we now have a method of destroying them, we're well on our way to destroying that bastard."

"I certainly hope so," Lily said quietly, watching her brave husband with a mixture of admiration and unease.

Chapter One Hundred-Nine

Lily spent the rest of the week trying to keep her thoughts to herself. Every day she went to work, she was on edge, both because of raging hormones and fear for the safety of her husband and herself. She often found she was unable to concentrate, resorting to snapping out of turn at co-workers.

"Perhaps you are overdoing it, Lily," the Unspeakable she was training under suggested.

"Overdoing it?" Lily asked, annoyed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Simply that you... How can I put this?" the man, whose name was George Silverstein, said delicately. "You're pregnant, Lily. You shouldn't be putting your body under this amount of stress. Perhaps you ought to consider taking some time off-"

"And do what with myself?" Lily demanded. She instantly regretted her tone and sighed. "I'm sorry," she muttered, forcing herself to look at the man who was both a friend and a boss.

While staying at home certainly had its merits and would ease some of her worry, would it be any better for her to worry within the confines of her house about Severus when he went to work every day?

"How much time?" she asked weakly. "You do realize I've still six months to go before-"

"Are you planning on working when a child comes along?" Silverstein posed softly, pulling her to the side.

"I... I hadn't thought about it, to be honest," Lily admitted, feeling foolish.

"Your training can be resumed at any time. At least leave early today and take the weekend to consider it. The weekend is nearly upon us, so you will have some time to decide."

"All right," Lily conceded, agreeing it was the best course of action.

A few minutes later, Lily was stepping through the fireplace into her home. It was weird to not have Severus around, as he always was home before her. Sighing, Lily brushed the soot off of her clothes and went upstairs to change into something more comfortable.

Having a few more hours before her husband would be returning, Lily tidied the upstairs. She was walking down the short hallway toward the stairs with a laundry basket in one arm when she passed the door to Severus's old bedroom. Pausing, she used her free hand to turn the knob and watched as the door swung open. She stared into the abandoned room: a twin bed with a night table next to it, a single window with the curtains drawn shut, a wardrobe, and a desk with a chair. Setting the basket down, Lily entered the small room and ran her fingers along the desk's surface. She went to the bed and sat on the edge.

Closing her eyes, she tried to imagine the room redecorated for a baby. Not worried about where they would put Severus's old things, she envisioned a crib where the desk now rested, a mobile with little rainbows, perhaps, hanging from above. The curtains would need to be changed... something lacy and light. Feeling a smile creep onto her face, Lily opened her eyes and found that she had subconsciously placed her hands on her slightly swollen stomach.

Feeling better, she stood and exited the room, pausing only a moment to gaze back inside before closing the door and taking up the basket once again.

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When Severus came home around five o'clock, he was greeted by the sight of Lily in the kitchen.

"Lily, what are you doing home already?" he asked, obviously concerned.

Lily smiled ruefully, wishing to ease her husband's concern. Going to him, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him before replying, "It's good to see you, too, Sev."

Having found some solace in the hours alone at home, Lily's mind was calmer. She could already see the wheels turning in Severus's head, though.

"You didn't lose your job, did you?" he questioned.

"Severus," Lily sighed, "can we please not worry for once? Merlin knows I've spent enough time worrying this week already-"

"What do you mean?" Severus asked, a crease forming between his eyebrows.

"I've been horrible at work, snapping at people left and right. No, I wasn't fired, and I didn't quit, but my boss suggested I take some time off. He was concerned about me because I'm pregnant, I think."

"If that's what he thinks is best, then of course you ought to rest. Lily, are you sure you're okay?"

"I just didn't want you to worry," Lily confessed. "I've seen the way you were already causing yourself distress, even if you kept it mostly to yourself. I can see that this whole Voldemort knowing the prophecy thing is really getting to you... and Dumbledore's suggestion... Sev, maybe it's not a bad idea to stay hidden."

"Spinner's End is hidden, Lily. Only a handful of people know where we're located, and as I already told Dumbledore, what does he expect us to do? Hide out in here for months or years?"

"Severus, please," Lily implored, her anxiety starting to return, "I worry about you every day when I'm not with you. You go to work; I go to work... A whole day passes, and then I hope to see you again come evening. What if- what if one day you don't-" she trailed off, unable to voice her worst fears.

Cupping her chin with his hand, Severus gently forced her face up, and he gazed into her eyes. "Lily, listen to me. Nothing is going to happen."

"How do you know that? Sev, he knows it's you! Can't someone else take it upon themselves to destroy these Horcrux-things?"

"Dumbledore and Regulus are both helping. Regulus has another lead, as you know. There's an Order meeting tomorrow night, so we'll find out the latest news then."

Lily nodded, not convinced. Her eyes were taking on a glassy appearance, so Severus drew her smaller body to his and enveloped her fully, his robes covering her.

"Do what you need to be happy, Lily," he murmured. "If you feel safer remaining at home, I see no reason why you can't."

"But what about you? If things got worse... I mean, really bad, would you stay home, too?"

"We'll see when the time comes."

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Severus and Lily endured another Order meeting, where several members reported increased Death Eater activity across the country. This wasn't surprising, as sightings of wizards in Muggle newspapers could hardly be ignored. At first, it seemed a large faction of Muggles could continue along the vein of thinking wizards and magic didn't exist, but now it was becoming a regular occurrence.

Which meant the Order members embarking on missions had to be all the more careful not to be spotted.

As the time ticked away, Severus noticed that Dumbledore had been keeping the Order plenty busy, and much to his dismay, the headmaster hadn't informed him of this. Two hours had passed, and Severus felt his patience waning, knowing he would have to wait until after the meeting to learn anything new about the Horcrux situation.

Finally, Dumbledore said something that snapped Severus's attention back.

"It has been brought to my attention that Voldemort is now employing dementors, and in great numbers," the old wizard was explaining. "There were occasional attacks noted in the past, but he seems to be exploiting whatever powerful creatures he has at his disposal. Attacks this week have been in the south in Cornwall. The Order will need to start acting in this regard, and I ask that anyone who is especially proficient and confident in Patronus-casting to volunteer."

Something I can do, Severus thought. He's asked for volunteers, and if he's been keeping me out on purpose, now is my chance to get involved again.

Many raised their hands, including Severus. Dumbledore nodded in turn to each of them. Beside Severus, Lily's hand was raised, and he looked doubtfully at her, murmuring, "Lily, it's not a good idea for you to be going."

She actually glared at Severus. "Oh? And you are safe?"

"You're pregnant," Severus started to argue.

"Severus, Lily, we'll discuss this after the meeting," Dumbledore interrupted casually, but Severus wasn't fooled. The headmaster had his own plans for the Snapes.

Dumbledore was already in the process of forming groups to undertake missions. The Longbottoms were absent, what with having a small baby at home to take care of, so two new Aurors who had just joined the Order were being recruited for the cause.

Severus glowered at Dumbledore, and had there not been so many people in the room, he would have said something scathing. As it was, he didn't wish to make a scene and make himself look foolish, as Dumbledore was held in high regard by all of his loyal, fawning followers.

Glad when the meeting ended, Severus sat in his corner, watching people as they left. Perhaps it was the forbidding look on his face, but no one approached Lily or him, not even their friends. James waved, giving them, or Lily more likely, a small smile as he walked past with

Mary, who was ogling Lily's stomach in a manner that irritated Severus even further.

When only Dumbledore, Lily, and Severus remained, Dumbledore said, "Well, I can tell you wish to say something, Severus. Go on."

I don't need to be given permission to speak.

"Why haven't you asked us to go on any missions lately? Or at least me?" Severus demanded.

"Now, just a minute," Lily interrupted. "Just because I'm pregnant-"

Dumbledore held up a hand. "Because both of you are in extreme danger. I do not wish to risk your lives unnecessarily. It is enough that you are pregnant, Lily, but you know Voldemort knows the prophecy and who it targets."

"You asked for volunteers," Severus spat. "Am I not allowed to go with you lot to Cornwall? We have two Horcruxes in our grip that can be given to dementors!"

"That is a risky business, and you know it, Severus," Dumbledore stated firmly. "It is true that I cannot stop you, but neither do I have to give you the details of where or when we will be going on these missions. It is best you both remain home-"

"Stop trying to tell us what to do!" Lily suddenly erupted, uncharacteristic of her. "Yes, we don't wish to have to hide away, and yes, I realize it's the safest option. You think I don't worry about Severus when he isn't at home? But you telling us what to do like we're incapable of deciding for ourselves is out of line, sir."

Severus stared at his wife in shock. She was a raging beauty, and his heart pumped wildly in admiration at her. This was the fiery Gryffindor he had fallen in love with. This was his Lily.

"I meant no disrespect," Dumbledore said evenly. "It is only out of concern that I say this."

"We've had a fair share of your concern, thanks," Lily scoffed, leaving Severus wondering how much of this was hormones and how much was actually her true self speaking.

Dumbledore continued as if Lily hadn't just spoken. "It should please you to know that Regulus is attending a dinner party at Bellatrix Lestrangle's house on Wednesday. He hopes to procure the Horcrux, which is hopefully the Cup of Hufflepuff, as we don't know what item of Ravenclaw's could be one."

"Then let Regulus do his job," Severus sneered. "Since we have no place in your esteemed Order any longer, we'll be going."

"Severus, Lily, please," Dumbledore nearly pleaded.

"You tell us to hide and keep things from us," Severus stated. "You kept things from me in the past, and look where that got the both of us - dead. You trusted a boy in my other life, a boy, Dumbledore, to take on that knowledge alone, knowing he would probably die or at least risk dying in the process. Don't pretend to have developed a conscience now. Don't pretend to fawn concern for us when we both know that isn't the truth."

Dumbledore's face hardened, his eyes icy and blue. "You know where the exit is, I believe."

Severus took Lily's hand, and they left without another word.

Chapter One Hundred-Ten

During the next couple of days, Severus found himself restless. While he still felt angry at Dumbledore, he found he was feeling oddly rejected. The way the old wizard had dismissed them from his office a few nights prior had been cold and uncharacteristic of him. Severus had known Dumbledore for years, and he could count on one hand the number of times he had heard the headmaster speak at him with such disdain.

Dumbledore could just as well have hexed him or physically punched him upon exiting that night. To make matters worse, Lily seemed to have instantly regretted the tone she had taken with Dumbledore. She was more upset at herself now, and Severus didn't know what to say to comfort her.

"He was only trying to help in his way," Lily would reiterate every couple of hours.

Severus only frowned, a part of him glad to be rid of Dumbledore, another part of him wishing to build the bridge between them again. Was breaking connections with the only man Voldemort feared, the only wizard who knew his secret besides Lily, the only man who could help destroy the Horcruxes the smart thing to be doing in a dire war?

Severus didn't think so. Sense told him that he needed that alliance with Dumbledore. He was a powerful wizard on his own, to be sure, and he was a war veteran, but Dumbledore was much older and had seen a great deal more in his lifetime. Severus was more experienced than most at his true age, but how could he expect to compare with someone well over a hundred years old?

It's not just experience that makes someone wise, though, Severus thought bitterly. A person can have all the experience in the world, but if he doesn't learn from those experiences, he is all the more a fool. Dumbledore was foolish enough to put that ring Horcrux on the first time... yet I felt its power, too. Maybe... maybe he's just doing the best he can with what he's got.

While Severus's thoughts whirled in his mind, Lily was visiting her family, having travelled safely through the fireplace. He had been sitting trying to read a book for pleasure, but now was pacing the room, unable to concentrate on anything enjoyable.

His mind was all on Dumbledore now. The aged wizard's tactics could be viewed as ruthless and unattached, but the part of Severus he now kept buried could understand such harsh methods. He had become so entangled in love and good virtue now that he had put away much of his old self. He had done plenty in his Death Eater days that had been beyond uncaring and indifferent. While he had never particularly enjoyed partaking in tormenting Muggles and Muggleborns, he had witnessed it and not stopped it all the same. He could accuse Dumbledore of many atrocities, but dare he gaze into a mirror at his own reflection, how deep would he have to look to see his own darkness?

Was that why Dumbledore upset him so? Because Severus saw a part of himself in the other man?

Severus knew he resented the old man for his manipulations, but still, hadn't Dumbledore given him a chance when no one else would have? He would have been in Azkaban had it not been for the headmaster. A life as a spy had been a prison in its own ways, but Severus couldn't blame Dumbledore for his predicament.

It was my fault. I chose to join the Death Eaters. I chose to let Lily drift away.

In all his self-induced punishment, Severus also knew he wasn't alone in taking blame. A whole host of people and situations could be blamed, but what good did it do to dole out blame when it was in the past? Every day when he looked upon his lovely pregnant wife, Severus thought about the new life growing inside of her. He had been given another chance at life, and in the past almost-four years, he had gained much more than just Lily's love returned.

Lily's parents loved him as their own. His father and he had reconciled when all seemed lost and impossible. He had proven he

could be admired and had friends because of it. Again and again, Severus had chosen what was right... for the right reason.

Yet there had been mistakes. There had been shortcomings, tempers lost, broken relationships, deaths...

But the whole time, Severus had been doing the best he could do.

What more could he ask of Dumbledore?

I'm going on that mission, and I'm not being reckless for wanting to help, Severus thought with determination. Lily won't like it, but I can't just stand by and wait for others to do what I can do: destroy the Horcruxes, for one. Dumbledore might not have enlightened me on the whereabouts of their mission, but there are others I can ask.

With this newfound purpose and drive, Severus tossed a handful of Floo Powder into the fireplace, shouting, "Remus Lupin's place!"

He stuck his head into the green flames and gazed about for the other young man. Within seconds, a shabbily-dressed wizard entered the kitchen, worry etched on his face.

"Severus?" Remus inquired. "What's the matter?"

Severus heard some shuffling, and Sirius appeared next to his frazzled friend. "Snape?" he asked. "What's going on?"

Severus sneered slightly at the older Black brother, then looked at Remus. "You couldn't be alone?" he asked, shaking his head. "Anyway, it's about the mission Dumbledore was talking about - the one involving the dementors."

"What about it?" Sirius questioned defensively. "It seemed to me that Dumbledore didn't want you involved from the looks he was giving you during the meeting."

"He asked for any willing volunteers," Severus said pointedly.

"Ah, then why aren't you asking Dumbledore yourself?" posed Sirius smartly.

Severus bared his teeth. "Listen, I don't have time for this. Just tell me where the bloody mission is going to be. It's important that I'm there."

Remus, trying to be the peacemaker, gazed from Sirius to Severus. "I don't know why Dumbledore wouldn't want you to participate, Severus, but you are a part of the Order. All right... we're to meet up in Exeter tomorrow evening at nine o'clock, Newman Road and Buddle Lane."

"Remus!" Sirius hissed, glaring at his friend.

"Thank you, Remus," Severus said, smirking at Sirius. "Oh, by the way, I have your potion ready. Give me a moment, and I can pass it over."

"Severus, are you doing anything right now?" posed Remus.

"Uh... n-no," Severus stuttered, caught off-guard by the question.

"When you bring the potion over, stay for a little while. Lily isn't around, I trust?"

"No, she's visiting with her family. I'll let her know, and then... all right, I'll be back."

Severus withdrew his head, breaking the connection, surprised by Remus's cordial invitation. He would grace the two Gryffindors with his company, if only to get his mind off things and to annoy Sirius.

Feeling better now that he knew the location and time of the mission, Severus proceeded down the basement stairs to his personal laboratory and extracted the needed phial of Wolfsbane. He returned upstairs a moment later, the potion in hand, and repeated his earlier ministrations of throwing the powder into the grate. He called for the Evanses' house first.

"Hello?" he called out, as no one was in the vicinity.

Lily was the first to respond. "Severus?" she asked, surprised to find his head hovering in the fireplace. "Is something wrong?"

"Why does everyone think something must be wrong when I come calling?" inquired Severus dryly. At Lily's confused expression, he amended, "Never mind. I just wanted to tell you that I'm going to be visiting at Remus's for a little while. I will probably be back before you return."

Lily smiled brightly. "That's great, Sev. Have a good time, then."

Severus returned the smile, sure that she was pleased to see him interacting with others. With a nod, he broke the connection and called out for Remus Lupin's small cottage. He entered the dwelling, trying not to gaze around at the surroundings too much. He was reminded of the worn down state of Spinner's End not so long ago.

"Here you are," Severus said, handing the vial of Wolfsbane over to Remus, who took it graciously.

"Thank you again for doing this for me, Severus," Remus replied. "You know you don't have to-"

"I am quite aware of that, Remus," Severus said stiffly. "Your gratitude is unnecessary. If the potion keeps one more werewolf tame during the full moon, all the better." Severus gazed upon Sirius coolly as he spoke.

Sirius reddened slightly. "You're never going to forget that prank, are you?" he asked.

"Most likely not," Severus replied darkly. "Deny it all you want, Black, but there was a time when you wished me dead. To have used your friend to do your dirty work is what makes it even more disgusting."

"That's unfair!" Sirius exclaimed hotly. "Why are you bringing up the past, anyway? Is that what you came here for? Moony, you've made a mistake in inviting him here if he's just going to try and goad me!"

"Aren't you listening?" Severus asked. "I said 'there was a time when you wished me dead.' As in the past, Black."

"Oh," Sirius said, rather stupidly.

"But you don't deny it? Your dislike being so great you thought the world would be better without me in it?" Severus inquired.

"Severus, Sirius, please!" Remus interrupted, annoyed. "I think that's quite enough. I didn't invite either of you here so you could argue. Is it so impossible for you to be in the same room without resorting to such behavior?"

"No, not impossible," Severus said, now wishing he could take back his words. Why did he have to bring up the past at a time when he had just been telling himself to look ahead? "If you don't bring it up, I won't," he added, gazing directly at Sirius.

"Fine with me," Sirius agreed. The red was disappearing from his face, and once he had his breathing under control, Sirius confessed, "Look, Snape..." His voice was somewhat strangled, but he forced himself to control. "I'm sorry, okay? It was really a stupid thing to have done, and I wasn't thinking about the consequences."

Severus wouldn't have believed the other man had it been a couple of years earlier, and he hadn't spoken much with Sirius so directly in the time since their graduation. Whenever they had been together, they had been in a group, but Severus didn't wish to open old wounds again. Having already inflicted enough upon himself and his relationship with Dumbledore, he knew now was not the time to be breaking bonds with his allies.

"Very well," Severus agreed, "but it stays in the past. I have no desire to bring it up again."

Remus was smiling ridiculously, to which Severus sneered. Sirius laughed at his friend's hopeful expression.

"Don't be so naive, Remus," Sirius stated. "It's not as if we've just agreed to be bosom friends."

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When Severus told Lily he would be going with the Order to Exeter the following evening, she was not happy. They were getting ready to settle into bed for the night, and the conversation had quickly become heated.

"I know you want to help, Severus, but it's dangerous!" Lily pleaded. "If I have to stay behind, then you should, too."

"I'm not pregnant," Severus pointed out, trying to be reasonable, but Lily would have none of it.

"I don't like how Dumbledore was trying to tell us what to do any more than you do, but what is our baby to do without a father? What if you get killed, Sev? You're not invincible. You died once before-"

"I will not die," Severus tried to promise.

"You cannot promise me that," Lily protested, nearly in tears. "How many more missions until you're happy? What more do you need to do until you feel you've done enough? Please, Sev, I'm begging you - don't go."

"Lily," Severus said softly, reaching for her, "please don't be this way."

Lily seemed to lose all resolve and collapsed into her husband's strong arms. He held her, running his hand through her hair, soothing her fears.

"Anything worth having is difficult and risky," Severus murmured. "I promise - the first sign of trouble, and I will Disapparate to safety."

Sniffling, Lily withdrew her buried face and regarded Severus with shiny eyes. "You must be careful, Sev. He knows. Voldemort knows about you. You're his primary target, surely."

"I will be careful," Severus whispered.

x x x x x

A little before the scheduled time, Severus Apparated to the meeting place in Exeter. He kept himself Disillusioned and in the shadows, just in case anyone saw him. In the past, a Muggle seeing a man suddenly materialize out of thin air would have scared him and nothing else. A quick Obliviate would have done the job, but with the Statute of Secrecy being breached, Muggles were most likely on the look out for anything suspicious. Severus knew from experience that what Muggles lacked in magic, they made up for with brute force... or worse.

Shuddering, then shrugging away childhood memories of his father, Severus glanced around. He noticed three people standing on the street corner, but he didn't recognize them. They appeared to be Muggle teenagers, probably sneaking out on a school night to smoke a pack of fags behind their parents' backs.

Severus honed his hearing and listened. He picked up on a couple of words only wizards would use. No Muggle knew about dementors, except perhaps Petunia, whose nosiness had given her more insight than was healthy for a Muggle to have about wizarding affairs, at least in Severus's opinion.

Glad he was wearing jeans and a Muggle coat, Severus removed the Disillusionment and stepped out into the street, appearing to be a regular teen himself. When the group of boys saw him, Severus immediately noticed recognition in their eyes.

"Severus, what are you doing here?" one of them asked.

Severus assumed this "boy" was Dumbledore.

"You asked for volunteers," Severus said mildly. "What's your favorite pastime?"

Severus asked the security question on purpose.

"Ten pin bowling, chamber music, knitting patterns, among other things," the "boy" returned, and had they been on friendlier terms and not on a mission involving creatures that sucked out souls, Severus might have laughed.

"Who else is with you?" Severus inquired.

"The two you spoke with, no doubt," Dumbledore stated, giving Remus and Sirius both stern looks over phantom spectacles, as he lacked the glasses that normally decorated his crooked nose.

One of the other boys smiled slightly, and Severus immediately knew which one was Remus.

"Who else is coming?" Sirius asked.

"Dedalus and the Prewett brothers."

"Prewett brothers?" Severus asked. "Are they the new recruits, then?"

"Right you are," Dumbledore replied calmly, his tone cool and indifferent.

Severus bristled slightly, but knew now was not the time or place to be picking a verbal row with the headmaster. Just then, the subjects of their discussion approached, all under the effects of Polyjuice as well. Severus was beginning to wonder why he hadn't been clever enough to think of Polyjuice. In his haste to come, he had been ever bit the reckless Gryffindor he couldn't tolerate.

"Welcome," Dumbledore greeted the newcomers. "Let us be off, then. Keep your eyes peeled. They are known to attack unexpectedly."

"And if we're seen?" one of the Prewetts asked.

"Get away as quickly as possible. You cannot risk taking the time to Obliviate, not when other Muggles may be around, watching and ready."

This is ridiculous, Severus thought bitterly. The very people we're trying to protect would attack us just as quickly as they would Death Eaters. To them, we're all the same.

For the next half-hour they walked along, keeping their wands hidden up their sleeves. Severus noticed each of the men remove a bottle from their coats, no doubt holding Polyjuice, but meant to look like a soda, and took a swig. They turned a corner, and Severus was beginning to wonder if they ought to split up.

The alley they now entered was the home to a couple of homeless people, slumped into corners, half-awake and probably very inebriated. Just as the group made to leave the alley, the already cold air grew chillier, and Severus watched his breath thicken in the air in front of his eyes. Before they could react, something darker than the night was descending upon one of the unfortunate Muggle bums, intent on sucking his soul out.

Dumbledore was the first to act. He couldn't simply stand by and watch as a helpless life was taken, but neither did he wish to risk be revealed in front of the Muggles. The battleground was different from mere weeks ago.

Severus didn't know what spell Dumbledore hit the creature with, but the dementor recoiled from the homeless man, who released a great shudder, as if thinking it simply very cold. Severus watched as the man drew back farther into the shadows, hoping in vain for protection and warmth. The dementor now sensed six warm and relatively happy souls to feast on and darted toward them.

At least Muggles can't see dementors, Severus thought witheringly.

Hoping Dumbledore had the Horcruxes available, Severus stood there, wondering what he ought to do, wondering if he had been foolish to come when he probably wasn't needed.

Dumbledore magically hurled the ring toward the dementor's mouth, and upon instinct, the horrid creature latched onto it. In strange fascination, the others watched, all of them wondering what was going on except Severus. The dementor was quickly finished with the

ring, and Dumbledore made to give it the locket next, but the dementor had other ideas.

It released a terrifying rattle, advancing on Dumbledore in a flash, seemingly angry and irritated for having been giving a small, unsatisfying sample of its food. It wanted the real thing.

The thing was too close to Dumbledore for the headmaster to react. Dumbledore dropped the locket, and throwing caution to the wind, Severus aimed his wand at the dementor, intoning, "Expecto Patronum!"

The dementor backed off, but suddenly, three more joined its company. Severus, Sirius, Remus, Dedalus Diggle, and the Prewetts fought back with Patronuses, and within seconds, a plethora of silvery animals were prancing about the alley.

Dumbledore, still recovering from his near-death encounter, was in the process of standing when a group of about ten Muggles entered the alley. Severus knew their display of Patronuses couldn't have gone unnoticed.

"There they are!" the apparent leader of the group yelled.

"Are you the ones responsible for people showing up right and left in a good-as-dead state?" demanded one of them.

The thing responsible for "good-as-dead states" came out of the shadows at the same time as the Muggle mob, which was growing as more Muggles joined it. Severus heard a scream and turned in shock to find Fabian Prewett, the Polyjuice wearing off, at the mercy of a new dementor. Worse, the dementors that had been driven away had now returned with an army of them, intent on the crowd of Muggles and wizards alike.

What a feast.

Author's Note: There you have it, a nice, long chapter... but with a cliffie. I'm horribly evil, I know, but I'm enjoying it immensely.

I realize that Severus is acting somewhat reckless. It has been my purpose that Lily's influence on him has softened him and also made him more prone to such Gryffindor behavior. And yes, as some pointed out, Lily has been influenced by Severus as well. She's snarkier than before. Anyway, Severus cannot and should not be portrayed as perfect. He doesn't always do the smartest thing or the right thing. If you were in his situation, you'd find it hard to think clearly, too!

Some are no doubt wondering why he would still choose to fight when he would be safer if he stayed hidden. I don't think Severus is the type to just hide. He hates being called a coward. While it's sensible and probably more realistic that most would hide, he isn't. He's a fighter. Besides, I wouldn't have much of a story to tell if Severus and Lily spent the rest of their days hidden in their house!

There has been some concern that I don't like Dumbledore. This is not true. The man was ruthless and manipulative, but he did the best he could do in the given circumstances, I believe. If I can love Severus, for all his faults (sometimes I think we Snape fans are a little blinded by our love for him and forget his flaws and darkness), then I can find Dumbledore a fascinating character, too. To be honest, I had hoped for a father/son type of relationship between them before DH, but upon reading the last book, that was obviously not the case. After everything Severus has been through, I do not think he would easily trust the old wizard. He would have a lot of resentment where Dumbledore is concerned. Since this story is mostly told through Severus's point of view, you get the feeling of a lot of bitterness toward Dumbledore, but I don't hate him.

Finally, you will probably notice now that I will NOT be simply destroying Horcruxes by having dementors feed off of them. It's not so easy as that. You also are seeing (finally) Muggles directly involved. Voldemort will truly regret having underestimated Muggles by the end of this fic.

Next chapter(s): We pick up from where we left off, and Regulus visits Bella's house in search of the Cup of Hufflepuff!

Chapter One Hundred-Eleven

Before things escalated, Severus could already see the impending disaster for what it was. Had the Order members been like the Death Eaters, they would have merely Disapparated, saving themselves and leaving the Muggles to their fates with the dementors. Instead, they were caught between a rock and a hard place. They would have to try and save the very people who wished them harm.

Dumbledore shot a series of phoenix Patronuses at some of the closest dementors. He was thinking along the same lines as Severus when he announced, "We wish you no harm, please. You surely realize that just like yourselves, there are good and bad wizards. It's the bad ones you need to worry about."

Dumbledore's attention was quickly diverted to a strangled scream behind him. Everything had happened at once and too fast for anyone to react and do anything to stop the dementor intent on taking Fabian Prewett's soul. A second later, Fabian's body was left slack, his blank eyes staring off into the darkness.

"What the bloody hell's just happened to him?" cried one of the Muggles, who was a young man no older than Severus.

Horried, some of the Muggles started to retreat, and the threat they could not see but could still feel followed them, leaving fewer dementors behind.

"What are you doing to us? Why?" screamed a middle-aged woman.

"Please, we're not doing-" Sirius started to reply in haste, but he was cut off when a dementor came at him. With one well-aimed Expecto Patronum, he sent the creature flying.

"There are too many of them!" Diggle exclaimed, panicked.

Severus scowled. Diggle wasn't the right man for this job, it seemed. Losing his cool under harsh and demanding circumstances didn't bode well for him.

Choosing to ignore the Muggles who actually had the nerve and resolve to advance on them, Dumbledore ordered his fellows to keep sending Patronuses, in the hopes that the dementors would flee. Caught up in shooting one Patronus after the other at the larger threat, Severus alone seemed to be concerned one of the Muggles might be armed.

In the distance, rattles and screams could be heard, dozens of Muggles losing their souls, but nothing could be done for them at the moment. Severus watched as more dementors fled and then felt someone's fist connecting with his back. Stunned, he turned, and on instinct to defend himself, he threw a hex at his attacker. The man cried out as his body stung, and for a split-second, Severus felt a pang of guilt at having attacked a Muggle.

He attacked you first, though; don't forget, he reminded himself.

Trying his best to ignore Fabian's body, Severus kept his eyes peeled on the Muggles. Sirius and Remus managed to drive off the last of the dementors, and Gideon was now free to run to his fallen brother's side, tears of anguish falling down his cheeks.

"No!" Gideon bellowed into the night, his voice raw and pained. "Why didn't you take the Polyjuice when you were supposed to?" he asked the soulless brother in front of him.

"Looks like you couldn't control your own magic, you evil bastards," someone accused. "Serve you right, I'd say."

The man who had just shouted his accusation, who unfortunately reminded Severus of his own father, withdrew a gun from his jacket and aimed it at Gideon, who was mourning his brother. No one expected this. Not accustomed to dealing with non-magical weapons, the wizards were stunned and frozen, and with a bang, the gun went off.

"Die like you've done to us!" yelled the man, his voice oddly strangled and almost inhuman.

The bullet was off just enough to avoid hitting Gideon. Sirius, acting foolish in Severus's opinion, made to tackle the Muggle, but Severus called him off. He aimed his wand at the offending Muggle and Stunned him. He then Summoned the gun to him.

Several Muggles watched in horror as their comrad fell.

"You've killed him!" accused the young male.

More Muggles ran away, feeling afraid for their lives.

"He's not dead," Dumbledore said, stepping toward them. They flinched.

"What do you want? What've we done to you?" asked a woman with curly blonde hair.

"We wish you no harm, as I told you," Dumbledore explained, realizing the fight was over. Around him, however, the Order members kept their guard up. Dumbledore continued, "Your friend is merely Stunned, meaning he is unconscious. A simple spell will reverse it, but we had to act, lest he harm another."

"But he's got the gun now," stated another younger man shakily, pointing at Severus.

Severus rolled his eyes and said scathingly, "My father is a Muggle... a non-magical person just like you. He carries around a gun to protect himself from evil wizards, but unlike you lot, he knows the difference between the good and the bad of us. What would you have me do, leave the gun available for any of you to grab and turn on us?"

Severus noticed the unconscious man's face was wet, as if he had been crying. He didn't fault the man for what he'd done, but neither could he risk someone dying because of ignorance.

The group of five Muggles shivered in the cold night, more from fear than chilliness. The distant screams were dying down now, so the dementors were likely retreating.

"How many more are dead now?" asked someone quietly.

"I cannot say," Dumbledore replied. "We were trying to defend you from those creatures that suck out souls. You cannot see them, but we can. They are called dementors and are tools used by those wizards who wish to do you harm. The evil wizard leading these forces is called Lord Voldemort, and it is him and his followers you need to fear."

"How do we know who these people are?" demanded the young man impatiently.

"Knowledge has always been a good thing," Dumbledore explained. "Give me but a moment."

He found the locket on the ground and picked it up, stowing it in his pocket. He then located the ring and was relieved to find it cracked. At least one Horcrux had been destroyed. Surveying his comrades, he addressed them, "Take Fabian to St. Mungo's and return to the safety of your homes after you report to the Ministry."

"What good is St. Mungo's going to do for my brother?" spat Gideon. "He's as good as dead!"

"I am sorry," Dumbledore murmured. "You have your orders."

Severus glanced from the Muggles to Dumbledore. Tonight had been nothing short of a disaster. They had barely protected a small group of Muggles, let alone the much larger crowd that was now soullessly sprawled about the streets of Exeter everywhere.

Figuring Dumbledore was going to educate the Muggles about the war and magic in the hopes of gaining allies, Severus Disapparated with the others. A moment later, he was standing inside the entrance way of his house.

Lily rushed at him, embracing him. "Sev, what's happened?"

She must be able to tell something's wrong by the look on my face.

"Dementors," Severus sighed. "Everywhere. They were loose in Exeter, and we went there in hopes of destroying the Horcruxes. One was destroyed; one wasn't. Dumbledore almost died... well, was almost kissed. A new recruit, Fabian Prewett, was kissed instead. And... a mob of Muggles started to attack us. Most of them were scared off, but one brought a gun with him," he explained, removing the object from his pocket.

Lily gasped. "Did anyone get shot?"

"Luckily, no, but Dumbledore has stayed behind to try and sway the Muggles, I think. I need to report to the Ministry, though. Dumbledore asked us to do so... I'm guessing because they've obviously lost control of the dementors and the whole mess with the Statute being broken."

"Go, then," Lily replied, "but return as soon as you can."

Giving her a quick kiss, Severus nodded. "I will."

"And, Sev, be careful. Every time you step out of the house, I worry for your life."

Severus stared back at those beautiful green eyes, shining with worry, and left with a crack.

What reassurance could he give that wouldn't be a lie?

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While Dumbledore was leading a faction of Order members on their "Destroy the Horcruxes with Dementors" mission in Exeter, Regulus was attending a dinner at Bellatrix's house. Upon entering, she greeted her younger cousin with as much warmth as a cold-hearted witch like her was capable of displaying and invited him into the lounge for drinks.

"And you will be pleased, young Regulus, to know that my esteemed husband is now out of Azkaban," she said, pointing out Rodolphus, who was conversing with the Malfoys. "First it was swaying the dementors to join our lord, and he followed a few days later with

mercy toward his captured followers. Isn't that right, sweetheart?" she asked Rodolphus, her tongue nearly in his ear as she came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his broad chest.

"Indeed," sneered Rodolphus, flicking Bellatrix off like an irksome fly. "No doubt you've been pining away without me around? Or is it more realistic to say that you were spending some 'quality time' with the Dark Lord? Everyone in this room knows you fancy him, Bella."

Bellatrix pretended to look hurt, but then laughed, an unpleasant, shrieking noise. Regulus tried not to grimace as he forced a smile.

Idiots, the lot of you, he thought disdainfully.

"Reg, don't be a wet blanket," pouted Bellatrix, taking her cousin by the hand and leading him closer to the bar. "I believe you are already acquainted with Lucius formally from the meetings and school, but you haven't really engaged in meaningful conversation. The man is brilliant, as Cissy can tell you... and rich. That's going a long way toward the Dark Lord's campaign."

"Little Regulus," Lucius said with a smirk. "Yes, how you've grown. You've made your parents proud, I'm sure... unlike that traitorous brother of yours."

Regulus really wished his family, whether by blood or by marriage, wouldn't bring up Sirius. When Narcissa smiled at him next, he knew it was at least genuine. Of his cousins, she had been the nicest toward him.

"Is it true, then, what I hear? Are you pregnant?" he asked.

"Yes," Narcissa replied, her smile widening.

Regulus finally relaxed some. This, at least, was something he could be happy about. Narcissa would make an excellent mother. Glancing over at Bellatrix, he hoped she never would get it in her dark head to procreate. He shivered at the thought of tiny Lestranges scampering about.

A handful of other Death Eaters and their wives were present as well, and Regulus had to pretend to enjoy their company throughout the dinner. It was easy to put forth a good face. He had been raised doing it. To fool others wasn't so difficult when a Slytherin. The tricky part was hoping the other clever Slytherins didn't figure you out.

The amount of alcohol consumed was ridiculous. Only Narcissa refrained (for obvious reasons), and Regulus was careful not to become intoxicated, lest he forget why he had come here in the first place.

After dinner, people retired to various parts of the house, lazily recounting their favorite raids or killings. Regulus kept close to Bellatrix during this time, listening for anything that might be useful. He had yet to survey the house, as getting himself alone would prove difficult.

"It's too bad I didn't finish that Mudblood off when I had the chance," Bellatrix was saying.

"Ah, Snape's little bitch," Rodolphus cut in. "That battle was an embarrassment."

"And to think," sighed Lucius, "that Snape could have made quite the Death Eater had he remained faithful to the cause. That idiot turned all noble four years ago and hasn't looked back since."

"Aw, don't speak so harshly about Severus," Narcissa intervened. "He may not have his priorities straight, but I was quite fond of him in school. Do you forget, Lucius, that you took him under your wing at one time?"

"Yes, at one time," Lucius spat. "Had I known what a disgrace to Slytherin he would become, I wouldn't have bothered."

"It would have been better had someone just offed him when he was younger and not such a threat," Bellatrix interrupted heatedly. "As it stands, however, I am proud to be in good standing with our master. He has entrusted me with something very important-"

"That you ought not to be sharing," hissed Rodolphus. "Watch your tongue, Bella, before it loosens further."

"It's no matter," Lucius chuckled. "You are not the only one, Bella, whom he has entrusted with precious and valuable commodities."

Ha, if only you knew, Malfoy, Regulus thought. If the Dark Lord knew that diary was nothing but an old, yellowing book, he'd write your death sentence.

Bellatrix's cheeks suffused in jealousy, not liking the thought of sharing the responsibility with anyone else. Taking a sip of wine, she forced herself to calm down and turned her attention to Regulus.

"You're awfully quiet tonight, Reg," she teased. "Anything you care to share?"

Realizing now was the moment, Regulus was careful in his reply. "I don't know, Bella. You seem pretty intent on sharing something. Isn't that right? You're right, of course. What an honor to have been given watch of something of value to the Dark Lord."

Her simpering smile widened. "Oh, wouldn't you like to know, Reggie? I'm afraid I must remain quiet, though. You heard Roddy. It wouldn't do to anger our master."

"Of course not," Regulus said smoothly. "I would never suggest such a thing." Standing, he added, "I'm going to use the loo if you don't mind."

"Not at all," Bellatrix replied, winking.

Regulus politely excused himself from the others and exited the sitting room. He headed down the hallway and up the stairs, finding the bathroom. In truth, he did need to use the toilet, but knowing Bellatrix, she would have picked up on his hint and taken the bait.

He finished his business and stepped into the darkened hallway, not surprised to find Bellatrix waiting for him.

"You always were sneaky and naughty, Reg," she said playfully.

"That's me, Bella... your bad little cousin."

"I really ought to keep a secret, but for you, Reggie, maybe I can make an exception..."

"You don't have to," Regulus put in innocently.

"Oh, when you're so sweet about it, how can I resist you? I never denied you anything, cousin. Here, follow me."

Regulus watched her long, yellow finger beckoning him, and he followed. It was to his advantage that Bellatrix was very intoxicated. She led him down the hallway and to another set of stairs, which went to the attic.

Upon reaching the top, Bellatrix placed a finger over her lips. "Shh," she whispered. "It's a secret, remember?"

Regulus nodded, trying to keep an eagerness out of his face.

Bellatrix went to a trunk and opened it. She withdrew something golden and small.

"It's just a silly, little cup," she supplied. "I don't know what our lord could possibly want with it, but if it's important to him, it's important to me."

"It's so... plain, really," Regulus stated, feigning lack of interest.

"Well, there you have it," Bellatrix said with a shrug. "Pretty boring." She returned the cup to its rightful place and headed for the stairs.

Regulus followed without glancing back. He went all the way downstairs with her and shared in several more hours of sharing stories and drink, late into the night. Before long, everyone fell asleep in their places, leaving Regulus alone in a state of wakefulness.

He stood and left the room, hoping to disturb no one. He quietly made his way up the stairs to the second level and up the next set of stairs to the attic. Shaking his head at Bellatrix's overconfidence and stupidity, he went for the trunk where the cup was kept. He reached for it, grasping it like a precious treasure. He withdrew an old sock from his robe and transfigured it into an exact replica of the cup, placing a Statis Charm on it to keep it in its current form, hoping Voldemort wouldn't discover the truth.

Glad for his connections and the trust his family put in him, Regulus left Bellatrix's house and Disapparated to the boundary of Hogwarts.

In his task, he had failed to realize he was being watched by Narcissa.

Author's Note: Aw, poor Regulus! I'm sure many of you are thinking that, but he took a huge risk doing what he's done.

You may be wondering why the cup wasn't yet at Gringotts. It's plausible that Bellatrix didn't hide it there right away (and put the charm on it). I think it possible that it was only hidden there once Voldemort was resurrected, as he would have been ever more careful with where he was hiding his Horcruxes. If Lucius Malfoy was in possession of the diary (assuming he kept it in his house) and didn't realize its value, it's possible the same could be said of Bellatrix.

The delay in updating is due to my having been out of town for four days and busy work days since returning. Yikes.

Finally, there's now a Spanish translation of this fic! Thanks, Ashamed Kawaii! See my profile page for a link!

Chapter One Hundred-Twelve

November passed into December, and as was the trend every year, autumn gave way into winter. The trees were but skeletons of their old selves, a visual reminder of the death spreading throughout the country. After dozens of Muggles had lost their souls to dementors that fateful day in early November when the Order had tried to intervene, Voldemort seemed all the more intent on using the creatures for his purpose.

To inspire fear and drain away all good memories was in stark opposition to what the season of Christmas stood for. Despite Dumbledore's efforts to speak with frightened Muggles as he had in Exeter, to bring people to the truth was not so easy. Some people were swayed by his words, but too many were too afraid to ever believe anything or anyone magical didn't mean them harm.

For that reason, wizards were kept to hiding more than ever. Confined to Spinner's End, Lily thought she might go mad. She wasn't able to work outside of the home or embark on any missions with the Order. Now halfway through her pregnancy, she could not risk herself or her baby, which she now knew would be a son. During that time, Severus had participated in several missions with the Order, and the death tolls on both sides were racking up.

Gideon Prewett had joined his brother in death the following week, and poor Marlene McKinnon had died in a fierce battle two weeks later. She had apparently been made a supreme target by the Death Eaters for speaking out so openly against Voldemort's campaign.

As for the ongoing mission to locate and destroy Voldemort's Horcruxes, it had come to a standstill. With the diary and ring obliterated and the locket and cup in their possession, the Order was on its way in the right direction, but there remained the glaring problem of the last Horcrux.

Dumbledore spent countless hours in his office puzzling over what it could possibly be. He knew it had to be something of significance to Ravenclaw, but what? And where was it hidden?

Voldemort had chosen significant locations for his hiding places or had left the Horcruxes in the care of his closest Death Eaters. Hogwarts was surely important in Voldemort's life. Dumbledore scoured his own memory bank for any insight. One memory in particular stood out, and he had removed it from his mind a couple of months ago and examined it time and time again, always coming up short.

Voldemort had obviously come to Hogwarts that day many years ago with more on his mind than merely wishing to teach. Had Tom Riddle honestly thought Dumbledore would permit him to teach there?

If he had intended to hide something on that day, it would have been a convenient excuse to come saying he was seeking employment, Dumbledore reasoned for the third time in the past half-hour as he sat in one of the armchairs in his office, staring out the window as the darkness gathered and snowflakes danced in a wintry ballet beyond the glass.

His eyes drifted to the cracked ring and the whole locket and cup sitting on his desk a couple of feet away. Something very powerful would be needed to destroy the remaining Horcruxes, most likely Dark Magic. Dumbledore had already tried any number of spells and enchantments on the objects.

It was, perhaps, time to become more creative.

Knowing he would probably be reprimanded for interrupting the younger wizard, Dumbledore decided to summon Severus nonetheless. His relationship with the Severus hadn't been the same since nearly two months ago, and Dumbledore had all but given up on trying to convince Severus to stay hidden. The Slytherin was stubborn as far as Dumbledore could see, and Dumbledore supposed Severus would never come to realize that he did, in fact, care very much about him.

Standing, the aged headmaster walked toward the fireplace and went through the motions of calling on the Snapes. He was now looking into the sitting room of Severus and Lily's house, and a few seconds later, the person he had requested was stepping into the room.

"Dumbledore?" Severus asked apprehensively, his eyebrows knit together.

"I am afraid I must ask something of you, Severus... It is not a huge undertaking. I simply would require your expertise in a matter that has been boggling my mind for the past many weeks."

"What do you require of me exactly?" Severus asked guardly, not wishing to evoke emotion.

"If you might step through, there is a memory you ought to see."

"Is it in regards to the last Horcrux?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, and it appears to be the most puzzling yet."

"Something of Ravenclaw's, you said," Severus stated. "Wouldn't Flitwick know?"

"I have already asked him, and alas, he doesn't know of anything that was of significance to Ravenclaw."

Severus frowned. "Lily can come, too. Merlin knows she's tired of being stuck at home. She has as good a mind as either of us." Pausing, he forced himself to add, "What didn't you ask me sooner... for help?"

"I would have thought that obvious, Severus. You seemed to have made yourself plain back in October that you didn't need my concern."

Severus shook his head, wondering if Dumbledore was trying to manipulate him into the position he wished him to take.

"I believe you said this is a war, correct?" Severus asked firmly. "Lily is pregnant with our child, a child who could be killed by Voldemort if we don't finish him first. This is no longer just about us, Dumbledore."

It's about the future of my child... of every child... of our kind... and Muggles, too."

"So, you understand what I mean by 'the greater good', after all?" Dumbledore suggested.

Severus reluctantly nodded, never having cared for that phrase. When everything had always been personal to him, he had thought belief in "the greater good" was just an excuse others gave, but the reality was that this war was personal for everyone, for all had loved ones they feared losing.

He was about to leave the room to retrieve Lily when she entered, saying, "I heard voices. What's going on, then?"

"Dumbledore needs us to look at a memory," explained Severus. "Your insight would be greatly valued."

Rubbing her belly, Lily gazed down at the bump and back at Severus and Dumbledore. "All right, then," she agreed, glad to be of service.

Dumbledore ended the connection, giving room for the Snapes to step through and enter the headmaster's office. Upon their arrival, Severus and Lily noticed a difference in Dumbledore's room. A gloom filled the place that hadn't previously existed, and it wasn't just due to the lack of lighting. The Pensieve sat on the desk, along with the Horcruxes and stacks of papers and books. Dumbledore had been very busy.

Approaching the Pensieve, Severus queried, "What's the memory contain?"

"Many years ago, shortly after my appointment as headmaster, Tom Riddle came to visit," Dumbledore began. "He wished to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts, or so that is what he told me. We both knew that wasn't the true reason for his visit. I have puzzled over this memory because it seems logical that he visited Hogwarts with more on his mind than merely to seek employment or share his thoughts with me."

"You think he hid a Horcrux at Hogwarts," Severus put in.

Well, that makes sense. Potter had come to Hogwarts the night of the final battle. He was coming from the Ravenclaw common room... or so I suspected when Minerva and the rest of the staff attacked me.

"Let's see this memory," Lily stated, intrigued, her eyes lighting up for the first time in a while.

"As you wish," Dumbledore replied.

Together, the three of them dove into the Pensieve and became observers as they landed in the same office from whence they had just departed. There were minor differences, and the Memory-Dumbledore was younger in appearance. The door opened a moment later to admit a younger version of Tom Riddle as well, but he was still appearing less human than his adolescent self had in earlier memories.

They listened to the conversation play out between Dumbledore and Voldemort, watching as they drank wine together, as if old friends who had gone their separate ways. What had started as surface politeness had quickly dissolved into true intentions, and just as Severus found himself getting into the conversation, it was over.

Back in the present day office, Dumbledore asked, "Any thoughts?"

"He had an agenda, definitely," Severus supplied.

"Did he really think you'd hire him?" implored Lily incredulously.

"Of course not," Dumbledore replied. "You will notice, too, that ever since Voldemort was turned down, there has been a curse on the Defense position. No one has lasted longer than a year."

"It's too bad we couldn't see what else he did while visiting Hogwarts that day," Severus said, "but perhaps a visit to the Ravenclaw common room is in order."

"Why is that?" Lily questioned, perplexed.

"Based on something that happened on the final night of my first life, it makes sense now," Severus said, not elaborating further. "There must be something there that can help us."

"It is worth a try," Dumbledore agreed.

They left the office and strolled through the many halls of Hogwarts, and by now, there were many new students who Severus didn't recognize. He saw the occasional older student who had known him, but they were left mostly alone. Finally reaching the entrance to the Ravenclaw common room, a raven on the door posed a riddle to Dumbledore, who answered it confidently, and the door opened.

The Ravenclaw students who were assembled in the room gazed at the headmaster and the two ex-students curiously. Nothing of any significance stood out among the chairs and sofas. The paintings watched Dumbledore, Severus, and Lily much in the same manner as the children.

"Do you think it's one of the paintings?" Lily asked softly.

"I don't know," replied Severus, agitated by so many eyes on him. "It would be much easier to concentrate if we were alone. Headmaster?" he finished, looking beseechingly at Dumbledore.

"Ah, very well," Dumbledore agreed. He dismissed the students from the common room, apologizing, and within a couple of minutes, they filtered out.

Finally alone, the trio surveyed the room for anything of importance. Severus was appraising painting after painting, asking them if they knew anything, but Lily's attention had been caught by a stately statue of Rowena Ravenclaw.

Ravenclaw had been a clever-looking, regal witch. On top of her head was a diadem, making her appear like a queen. Lily was intrigued by the diadem and glanced around. Of anything in the room, the diadem seemed to be the most likely thing of significance.

"Hey, look at this," Lily called Severus and Dumbledore's attention. The two men stopped what they were doing and came over to Lily, who said, "What do you think of the diadem?"

"It is possible," Dumbledore admitted, "but where would we even begin looking for it? I've searched the entire castle many times through."

"You could ask the house elves," Severus sarcastically suggested, but then he realized his point was actually valid. Sobering, he added, "They helped us before. Voldemort overlooked them just like many wizards and witches do. They are able to move about the castle freely."

"Your idea has a lot of merit," Dumbledore agreed. "Very well. Let's make a trip down to the kitchen and see what we can find out."

A few minutes later, the trio was standing in front of the painting of a bowl of fruit. Dumbledore tickled the pear, and Lily giggled at the silliness of it all. The portal opened, and Severus and Lily followed Dumbledore into the kitchen, where about a hundred house elves were preparing various sorts of food.

"Headmaster, sir!" one of the little creatures shrieked. Coming to Dumbledore, he asked, "What may Floppy be doing for you, sir?"

"Hello, Floppy," Dumbledore greeted the elf with a smile, his moustache quivering. Severus tried not to groan and roll his eyes, but then Dumbledore continued, "There is something important I must ask you... or any of the house elves."

"Anything, sir."

Five others had joined Floppy, all nervously excited to help.

"Is there any place in the castle that you know of that someone might use to hide something they don't want anyone else to find?"

"Indeed, sir!" another of the elves exclaimed.

"The Room of Requirement!" Floppy added.

"Or the Come and Go Room!" added another.

"And where might we find this room?" Severus questioned impatiently, wishing the elf would have elaborated.

Floppy and the others gazed upon Severus and Lily questionably.

"We is not having to answer to anyone but the headmaster," one of the elves announced dutifully.

"They are friends," Dumbledore stated, "so you can trust them."

The elves immediately lost any shred of suspicion on their faces as they nodded obediently.

Friends? Severus couldn't help but wonder.

"It is being on the seventh floor, opposite of the painting of Barnabas the Barmy trying to teach a group of trolls ballet," explained Floppy.

Nodding encouragingly, Dumbledore went on, "Very good, and how do we access it?"

Feeling emboldened, Floppy continued, "You must be walking by the wall three times, concentrating very hard on what you need. It then reveals a hidden door."

"Thank you, Floppy... thank you, all of you," Dumbledore told the house elves. "You have been of much help."

Dumbledore headed for the exit, and Severus gave the elves a small nod of appreciation.

"Thank you," Lily told them kindly, smiling.

Severus didn't have to ask where they were headed as they ascended several flights of stairs. How he could have never known

about this room was surprising. Then again, Dumbledore didn't even know about it, and he'd been at Hogwarts much longer.

They walked in silence to their destination. Thankfully, because of the late hour, the hallway was absent of students. Dumbledore stared briefly at the blank wall.

"Here it goes," he murmured, thinking steadily about what he desired. Lily and Severus stepped aside to let him have a go.

He had to amend his thoughts a few times before a door suddenly appeared amongst the stone. Amazed, Dumbledore grasped the handle and pulled it open.

"Just when I think I knew all of this castle's secrets, I am proven wrong," Dumbledore stated in awe.

Severus and Lily entered just behind him, staring up at the vast expanse of the room. A cathedral-sized room lay before them, filled with odds and ends, things countless students had hidden over the years.

"Looks like Voldemort wasn't the only one who discovered this place," Severus put in dryly.

"It'll take hours to find the diadem... if that's what we're even looking for and it's in here," Lily said.

"We had best get started, then," Dumbledore stated. "You are free to return home if you don't feel you're up for it, however."

Lily didn't know whether to be offended or not. "No, we'll stay," she replied firmly.

"As you will," Dumbledore said mildly. "We'll each take a row."

Severus and Lily nodded and began the enormous task before them.

About an hour in, Lily's voice rang out triumphantly, "I've found it!"

Author's Note: You'll have another update by Tuesday!

Updates haven't been working for everyone (I haven't gotten any for the past week), so check for more than one chapter if you haven't received an update in over a week. If you want to contact me, please email me at [sindie11\(at\)yahoo\(dot\)com](mailto:sindie11@yahoo.com), don't PM me (I might not get it).

Happy Halloween!!

Chapter One Hundred-Thirteen

"I've found it!"

Severus and Dumbledore heard Lily's triumphal proclamation and so followed her voice to where she was standing. In her delicate hands was an ancient diadem, the very one of which they had seen a replica on the statue of Ravenclaw.

Dumbledore's eyes widened as he approached Lily and held out his aged hands for the item. "May I?" he asked.

"Of course," Lily replied, smiling at her victory and awed to be holding something simultaneously so old and housing a piece of Voldemort's soul.

Dumbledore took the diadem and examined it. Severus warily watched him, stepping next to Lily.

"It doesn't seem to do harm by just touching it," Severus observed.

"There is the same odd sensation when holding it as the other Horcruxes... I can feel the pulsing life inside. Let's get it back to my office and put it with the others." Finding Lily's gaze, Dumbledore added, "Good work, Lily."

"Thanks," Lily replied. Her smile faded as she realized they still had three Horcruxes needing destroying. "But how will we dispose of it if dementors are too risky?"

"This room gives the requester anything he or she wants, correct?" Severus inquired, an idea coming to him.

"That is the way it appears to work," Dumbledore agreed.

"If we step out of the room and back into the corridor, we ought to be able to wish for the room to produce the Sword of Gryffindor for us," Severus pointed out. "You used it before, sir, when you destroyed the ring, and you wanted me to give it to Harry Potter to aid him in the destruction of the other Horcruxes."

"Well, it is certainly worthy of a try," Dumbledore said with a nod. "Very well." He stowed the diadem in his robe.

The trio exited the room and found themselves back in the darkened hallway a moment later. Severus decided to have a go at trying to gain access to the room for what he desired. Walking by the area three times where the door had appeared the first time, he thought long and hard, wishing for the sword.

When nothing happened, he grew frustrated.

It worked for Dumbledore. What am I doing wrong?

"Maybe I ought to try?" Lily suggested.

"I am willing as well," Dumbledore added.

Severus knew his pride was getting the best of him, but he didn't want to let them try. This had been his idea, after all, and he was a clever enough man!

Groaning, Severus shook his head. "Let me try a little longer," he ground out in annoyance.

Need and valor, Severus suddenly thought. The sword can't just appear for use unless it's taken properly.

So he amended his original desire, asking the room to produce the sword in an attitude of need and valor.

The door reappeared, and Severus stopped in his pacing, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Brilliant," Lily breathed.

The sword was no where obvious. Before them sat a forest.

Lily was the first to step into the room, which no longer seemed like a room when filled with numerous trees. "Amazing," she whispered in awe. "Is there anything this room can't do?"

"I'm sure it has its limitations," Severus stated factually, "but this is rather impressive." He took her hand as he heard movement of creatures among the trees.

"Most interesting," Dumbledore said with a smile. "It would seem the room has devised an obstacle we must first pass before getting the sword."

In silent agreement, Severus and Lily led the way into the thickness of trees. They walked along for some time, feeling like they were outside in the Forbidden Forest. How Hogwarts could house a forest was beyond them. Keeping their eyes peeled for any sign of the sword, their heads turned from side to side as they made their way. So far, nothing had tried attacking them, and nothing had surprised them, despite the rustling of leaves, telltale signs of animals moving about the vegetation.

The makeshift path they were forging turned left, and Lily released a startled shriek as something fell on her. In her surprise, she had released Severus's hand and stepped back. Severus's eyes immediately settled on his wife, finding the source of her shock. A large snake had fallen out of the tree nearest them and was now coiling itself around her neck.

"Don't move, Lily," Severus said levelly. "I'll be rid of the thing for you in a second." Withdrawing his wand, he aimed it at the snake and cast a spell that should have made it disappear. When that failed to work, he tried transfiguring it, but still nothing. He couldn't risk burning it, as he didn't want to harm Lily.

Meanwhile, the snake was growing more and more agitated and tightening its coils around Lily. She whimpered, looking desperately at her husband and then at Dumbledore.

"Lily!" Severus exclaimed in panic. Glaring at Dumbledore, he yelled, "Do something for her! My spells aren't working!"

"I think this is the moment," Dumbledore said much too calmly.

"Damn it, Dumbledore! Now isn't the time to stand around and give me cryptic messages! I need help!"

At Severus's last words, the Sorting Hat fell from the same tree from whence the snake had come.

"What?" Severus asked. Then he noticed it - the gleam of something silver and red. "The sword!" Severus shouted in realization.

Knowing what he must do, he reached for the sword and withdrew it from the hat. Not sure how he would use it on the snake with it being on Lily, Severus gave his full attention to the creature. While the snake's mid-body was coiled around Lily's neck, its head was held out away from the rest of its body. He was grotesquely reminded of Nagini and his own death.

"Sev," Lily croaked, her face turning blue. "Hurry."

With a growl, Severus lowered the sword onto the snake, just below the head, and severed the beast's ugly head from its body. The coils went limp, and Lily pushed them off with some effort, stepping back, still recovering from her near bout of death.

"Are you okay?" Severus asked, throwing the sword down and going to her.

"I am now," she said, catching her breath. "Thank you, Sev."

"Well done," Dumbledore commended, picking up the sword. "That was not what I would have expected to happen in this room, but it's unlikely the room would have given us something we couldn't handle. Now, let's return to my office and destroy some Horcruxes."

Severus glared at Dumbledore's back as he retreated. "He didn't even ask if you were all right," Severus murmured to Lily.

"Never mind that," Lily replied, not sounding too happy herself.

They eventually were back in the headmaster's office. Dumbledore placed the diadem next to the cup and the locket and examined the three seemingly harmless objects.

With anticipation, Severus watched, eager to see the Horcruxes destroyed. Despite his anger at Dumbledore for not intervening earlier in the Room of Requirement, they had a task at hand, and if they were successful, only Voldemort himself would remain after today. He would be rendered mortal in a couple of minutes without knowing it. This, Severus figured, could almost make up for the fact that Dumbledore had done nothing to help Lily.

Dumbledore brought the blade of the sword down on the diadem first, but only a resounding clang issued forth. Frowning, he tried again. Nothing but the noise.

He tried the cup and the locket. Still nothing.

Several times over he tried, but the sword only hit the Horcruxes, metal on metal banging and clanging.

No longer so celebratory, Dumbledore's shoulders sagged slightly. Turning accusing eyes on Severus, he said, "I thought you said the sword was effective in destroying the ring Horcrux."

"It was," Severus protested. Filling with bitter rage, thinking their journey into the forest in the Room of Requirement and Lily's near-death had been for nothing, Severus yanked the sword from Dumbledore's hand and hit the Horcruxes repeatedly.

He was no more successful than Dumbledore. As he continued to rail against the Horcruxes, his anger became irrational. His goal was no longer to destroy parts of Voldemort's soul, but simply to show how upset he was at failure. He hadn't come this far only to be wrong.

"Severus!" Lily exclaimed many times, trying to gain his attention. Finally, she took out her wand and Accioed the sword to her. Startled to find his hands empty, Severus stopped his movements and turned toward Lily, the dejection of failure now evident in his body.

"I don't understand," he said hoarsely. "It should have worked."

Sighing, Dumbledore implored, "Think, Severus. Is there anything you might be forgetting? When did the sword appear the first time?"

Severus thought back to Harry Potter's second year, which seemed more than one lifetime ago. The boy had come from the Chamber of Secrets with the sword. He had used it to kill the basilisk.

His eyes widening, Severus felt realization strike him. "The sword must have been infused with basilisk venom when Harry Potter used it to kill the great serpent. Of course, seeing as none of us can speak Parseltongue, we cannot enter the Chamber of Secrets. This sword is useless without the venom."

Severus had explained the Chamber of Secrets incident to Dumbledore months ago when he had given him important information on what he knew about the Horcruxes. The diary had been involved with the Chamber, after all, but he had neglected to make the connection between the sword and its use in destroying the basilisk.

"Basilisk venom is a rare substance," Dumbledore murmured.

"Highly regulated and nearly impossible to find... and very expensive," Severus added, reason returning to him as he found himself calming down. "Very few potions use it."

"But today hasn't been a complete waste," Lily pointed out. "Not only did we procure the last Horcrux; we now know of another way to destroy them."

The two men gazed at her profoundly.

Author's Note: I know I promised by Tuesday, but I've been sick, so Wednesday morning isn't bad, right?

I know it's short, but this was a quick update. I have a good friend in town until Sunday, so no updates for at least another week.

Some were curious as to how Severus didn't know about the Room of Requirement. While it's possible he could have heard about it when Umbridge discovered the DA there, it's also possible he didn't hear all the details. I don't want to make things too easy for him! He can't know everything!

Chapter One Hundred-Fourteen

Having spent his adult life as a Potions Master, Severus knew a thing or two about where and how to procure rare and dangerous ingredients. Basilisk venom wasn't something one could find in any old apothecary. Even Knockturn Alley, for all its dark objects and secrets, didn't sell such a thing on a regular basis.

When his position had been with the Death Eaters, or assumed to be with them, Severus could find an easy welcome in Knockturn Alley. He did not have that luxury now. He knew he was one of the most sought after Order members by the Death Eaters and Voldemort himself. He would need to go in disguise and use his skills he'd acquired from years of spying to his benefit.

Even then, there was no guarantee he would be successful.

While he waited for an opportune time to go on this mission, Severus read through books he borrowed from Dumbledore and from his own collection, trying to find another way to destroy Horcruxes. If he had found information, albeit very little, on Horcruxes before, he hoped he would find something else.

His nose buried in one of the vast tomes, he didn't hear Lily as she entered the sitting room at Spinner's End. It was evening and the week before Christmas, and just beyond the window, winter was making itself evident as the third snowstorm that month was pummeling the world with its whiteness.

Lily had been upstairs in what had been Severus's old bedroom. She had taken it upon herself to start redecorating the room and making it into something suitable for a baby. Even though they had four months yet before the baby would come into the world, being stuck at home every day afforded Lily a lot of time. For now, she had patched her relationship enough with Petunia to ask for her help, and glad to have something useful to do, Petunia had agreed.

In the past couple of weeks, Lily couldn't help but notice the sadness on her sister's face whenever they were together. Whenever Petunia's eyes travelled to Lily's belly, Lily would smile hopefully, and

Petunia would just as soon meet Lily's eyes and return the smile, although they both knew her heart wasn't fully in it.

Now, however, Lily was alone and had been changing the border pattern every ten minutes with the use of her wand. Thinking Severus might welcome the distraction, she crossed the firelit room, the warm orange hues dancing on the walls and ceiling, and perched herself on the arm of the chair.

Feeling her presence next to him, Severus withdrew some from the book and turned to look at her.

"How long have you been fretting over finding a way to destroy the remaining Horcruxes?" Lily teased lightly.

The crease of concentration between Severus's eyebrows lessened, but he replied seriously, "We do need to find a way to get rid of them, Lily. I'd like it done before the baby is born. I don't want our son being born into a world with Voldemort running amuck."

Lily placed a hand on the book Severus was holding firmly in his grasp and gently took it from him, marking the page before she closed it and set it aside.

"True," she conceded, "but there's also this silly little thing called life you need to live in the meantime." She leaned in and kissed him.

A part of Severus wanted to protest that they wouldn't have any lives if Voldemort won the war, but he gave in to her ministrations. He had been spending too much time pouring over books and thinking about Horcruxes to allow himself to relax. Here was his lovely wife desiring him very much... How could he not give in?

He returned the kiss and wrapped an arm around her, pulling her onto his lap. When the kiss broke, Lily rested her head against his shoulder and snaked her arm around his chest. Staring into the fire, she sighed.

"I miss this," she murmured.

"So do I," Severus admitted. "I'm sorry for not spending enough time with you, Lily. I don't imagine I've been very good company lately."

Lily picked up on the troubled tone of his voice and shifted her gaze to her husband's face. The soft glow of the fire gave his normally pale skin a healthy sheen. His dark eyes appeared even darker, save the reflection of the flickering light in his pupils. Lily brushed his hair behind his ear and kissed his cheek where the strand had rested a moment ago.

"Don't be sorry, love," she said kindly. "I know you want a better world for our son, and you've been working very hard to give him that... to give us all that. Do you have any idea how brave you are, Severus?"

Severus swallowed and stared back into Lily's eyes. It was such a simple statement, but so much hope rested in those words. Lily was putting her trust and faith in him that he would see through what he had started.

"I'm not the only one fighting," Severus said. "You have done more than your fair share, too, Lily."

Deciding on a different tactic, Lily brought her lips to his ear so they barely skimmed across the tender skin there and whispered, "Yes, but you know what else I think of your selfless devotion? It's damn sexy..."

Severus felt his insides melt, all thoughts about Horcruxes evading him, and pulled her in to a fierce kiss. They continued their ministrations for the next several minutes before deciding that they would have more room to spread out on the sofa. Between the colored lights charmed to blink on the Christmas tree and the fire, the dim lighting added to the romantic feeling filling the room.

After some time, when the fire started to die down some, Severus excused himself and added another log to it. He levitated a blanket across the room and covered both Lily and himself with it, keeping her snuggled close.

Lily's sigh was content, and she remarked, "Despite everything going on out there in the world, I don't think I could be happier than right now, here with you. I do love Christmas."

Severus had only come to appreciate the holiday since spending it with Lily. Many years as a student, he had chosen to remain behind at Hogwarts, not wishing to see his parents fight back home. That meant Christmases away from Lily. Even their first couple of Christmases before Hogwarts couldn't compare to what he experienced now. As children, they had been playmates and best friends as children understand the meaning. Now, Severus could call Lily much more than his best friend.

"I know what you mean," he replied finally after some reflection. "If you'd asked me before what I thought about Christmas, I wouldn't have understood how you could love it so much, but I know without needing to explain it now. You understand me, Lily."

Years of dislike for the holidays when an embittered professor seemed lifetimes away, several universes separated. A passing thought of Dumbledore asking him to pull a cracker and a horrid vulture-hat appearing flitted through Severus's mind, and he chuckled softly.

"What?" Lily questioned, smiling up at him.

"A silly thing, really," Severus replied. "Of course, I didn't find it so amusing at the time. I don't suppose I had much of a sense of humor then."

He proceeded to explain the memory to Lily, who giggled, her laughter so appropriately sounding of Christmas bells, reminiscent of cheer and delight.

"I don't blame you for not finding it funny at the time, Sev. Most things are only humorous after the fact, anyway."

"I suppose so," he agreed.

They continued their conversation into the night, and when they grew too tired to keep their eyelids open any longer, they simply moved to their bedroom, still locked in one another's company.

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When Christmas Day arrived, Severus and Lily spent it with Lily's family at her childhood home. Tobias had been invited back for a second year. As the families shared in the joyous celebration, Lily imagined the following year when they would have a baby. Everyone would no doubt be fawning over the child, one still too young to understand why people were shoving brightly wrapped boxes at him. For now, Lily kept her attention mostly on Oliver as he opened the packages, a child old enough to appreciate the excitement.

Severus was sitting next to her on the couch, watching her expression as she gazed upon Oliver. He knew what was going through her mind. His own eyes drifted to the boy, and Severus tried to envision his own son. Oliver's dark brown longish hair was similar to how Severus had worn his hair when he was a boy, and he supposed his son might look similar.

"Oliver is a cute kid," Lily whispered to Severus, "but you do realize that our son will be adorable."

Severus snorted. "Because he'll have some of your characteristics, yes, that will help."

Thankfully, Petunia was too busy talking with her mum, and Tobias and Ross were discussing Muggle politics over cans of soda in the dining room, so Severus and Lily weren't overheard.

"You'll see," Lily said confidently. "He'll be beautiful."

While Severus and Lily were enjoying a lovely Christmas, Regulus was having to put forth a good face at his house. His parents were hosting Christmas this year for the entire extended family. Only Sirius, of course, was absent, but Regulus found himself almost wishing his older brother was present. Seeing his cousin Bellatrix and her deplorable husband again wasn't his idea of a good time.

And I don't know what Narcissa was thinking in marrying Malfoy, except that he's rich and has connections, I suppose. The man is a pompous idiot, Regulus thought scornfully, giving Lucius a polite nod as the older man finished another joke about Mudbloods.

After another agonizing ten minutes in the man's company, Regulus excused himself, grateful for the crowd. At least no one would really miss him.

Or so he thought.

He had just reached for the knob to his bedroom door when a pale hand got to it first and stopped him.

Stunned, Regulus turned to find Narcissa standing there, an odd expression on her normally composed face.

"Narcissa," Regulus stated, raising an eyebrow. "Is there something you wanted?"

"Regulus," Narcissa returned softly, turning the knob and opening the door. "Enter. There's something I wish to discuss with you."

"Thanks for giving me permission to enter my own bedroom," Regulus joked, wondering if Narcissa had grown tired of her husband's prattle as well.

Once inside, Narcissa closed the door and leaned against it. She raised her wand and cast a spell to keep their conversation from being overheard.

Seeing that she appeared serious, Regulus asked, "Is something wrong?"

"That depends on your answer," Narcissa replied.

"What are you talking about?" Regulus questioned, now beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"Several weeks ago, when we were all at Bella's, you stole something. A small golden cup."

Regulus felt his insides go numb. He thought his stomach might drop out from under him.

When he didn't elaborate or confess, Narcissa continued, "Because it's you, I didn't tell anyone, but, Regulus, what are you playing at? The Dark Lord gave something to Bella be safekeeping, and I'm sure by your sneaking around when you thought everyone pissed, you didn't think you'd be caught, but you forget that I'm pregnant and cannot drink."

"All right," Regulus said, thinking fast, "yes, I took it. You saw me. I can't deny it, but listen, Cissa. Bella was bragging about it in front of us, and the very fact that she showed me where it was being kept proves that she isn't taking the Dark Lord's orders seriously. What if I couldn't be trusted? What if I meant her harm? What if I were one of Dumbledore's do-gooders under Polyjuice? The point is, I think the Dark Lord made a mistake to entrust Bellatrix with something so valuable and important to him. If a little drink can loosen her tongue enough to spill his secrets, what else might she reveal? She doesn't know it's been taken, and I'd like to keep it that way. No one is the wiser; no one got hurt. The Dark Lord won't punish her if he doesn't find out about her foolishness. I haven't told him, and I won't. I'm not looking to betray my family or my lord, but neither am I trying to somehow prove I'm better than Bella. I'm a low Death Eater in the ranks. Bella is much more trusted, and I wish for her to keep her position of power by protecting her from her own shortcomings. See, Narcissa? No one suffers anything this way."

Narcissa listened thoroughly and seemed to buy Regulus's explanation. "You do make some good points," she agreed. "Yes, Bella can have a loose tongue, and although she's totally devoted to serving the Dark Lord, she does have a tendency to go too far in her desire to gain attention. If you won't tell anyone, I won't. You know I love you, little cousin. I'd hate to see anything happen to you. Don't be like your brother, Reg."

"Don't worry, Cissa. I won't be."

"I suppose we ought to head back downstairs. I expect pudding will be beginning in a few minutes, and you know Lucius loves to save the best jokes for then." She smiled.

Regulus nodded and followed Narcissa out the door.

Chapter One Hundred-Fifteen

Shortly after the New Year, when people had been celebrating the beginning of a new decade with the start of 1980, Dumbledore held another Order meeting. After it ended, he asked Severus and Lily to remain behind, which didn't surprise Severus in the least.

When they were the last three people standing in the office, Severus asked, "What is it this time, sir?"

"I have been giving the procurement of basilisk venom much thought, and I think it would be best if you held back, Severus. To put yourself at risk when you are Voldemort's prime target would be foolhardy. You are not alone in this mission to destroy the remaining Horcruxes, after all."

"Are you suggesting you go instead? If that's the case, I think you're setting yourself up to act just as foolhardy, as you so bluntly put it," stated Severus, annoyed at the headmaster for trying to take control of his life yet again. And just when I thought we were getting on better, Severus thought bitterly.

"I am not saying that," Dumbledore replied levelly. "We have a spy working for us, after all, and he's already in deep with the Death Eaters. Regulus is willing to go in your stead, Severus."

"I see," Severus said in clipped tones. "And if he's found out?"

"That is a risk, I admit, but he knows that," Dumbledore explained. "I have already discussed the mission at length with him. I was simply waiting to discuss it with you both before I gave him the go-ahead."

Severus crossed his arms and glared. From his side, Lily sighed softly and placed a hand on her husband's stiff forearm.

"Sev, maybe he's right. Not only is the risk too great now, but you'll be a father in a few short months. I don't want our son growing up without his father."

Severus gaped at Lily. He knew she worried about him whenever he went out fighting with the Order, but in the past, she had grown tired of Dumbledore's desire to control their lives just as much as he had. Gazing at her now, she appeared worn out. Maybe the pregnancy was weighing on her too much?

Severus looked at Dumbledore again. His dark eyes probed the blue ones across the desk, and without meaning to, Severus was suddenly inside the old man's mind. For only an instant before pulling out, Severus wondered if Dumbledore had granted him access intentionally. Surveying the headmaster the short distance away, Severus was shocked to have felt what Dumbledore felt... for him.

"Very well," Severus said, not liking the release of control, and he watched as Dumbledore smiled knowingly at him.

Stop looking at me like that, Severus thought, irritated.

"I will be in touch," Dumbledore replied. "Good night."

Lily gazed at Severus questioningly as they stood to leave. Once they were back inside their sitting room, Lily implored, "What happened in there?"

"Dumbledore and I... I think we may finally understand one another," Severus admitted. "I saw into his mind, Lily. I hate to say it, but for all his manipulative ways, he actually does care. It was almost scary... how much love was radiating from that man."

"Dumbledore's always been an advocate of the power of love," Lily stated, "but even I was beginning to doubt that not so long ago, what with the way he seemed to be treating you."

Severus loathed himself for it, but as he sat down on the sofa, feeling his knees might give out from under him, he whispered, "You've no idea, Lily, how I would have wished for an inkling of his approval before. There were times I had almost convinced myself that he actually cared about my welfare, but there were always reminders that I was only as valuable as what I could give him... or so I thought. Even in the end, when he admitted his plans for Harry Potter, I was

appalled because I thought he loved the boy. If he loved him as he claimed and yet still was willing to sacrifice him in the end, I didn't think he thought much of me at all, you see."

"Sev," Lily murmured, sitting next to him and taking his hand, "why didn't you tell me this sooner? And why does Dumbledore's opinion... or approval... or whatever you want to call it matter so much to you, anyway?"

"It's stupid," Severus almost spat. "Ridiculous. It shouldn't matter, but it does."

"He's not a saint, and if you ask me, you've acted more noble than he has on plenty of occasions," Lily pointed out. "I know a lot of people admire him, but you've seen sides of him far have. You know him better than most."

"I suppose so," Severus conceded. "As for Regulus going on this mission, I admit my concern for him. The game he's playing is very dangerous. I was in his shoes, so I would know. If he's found out-"

"That's the end of his life," Lily finished. "Then let us hope he knows what he's doing."

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Regulus shifted uncomfortably in the oversized clothes he was wearing. When Dumbledore had given him his mission the evening before, Regulus was filled with a mixture of excitement and concern. He knew it was part of his duty as spy, but going about Knockturn Alley asking for basilisk venom could potentially rouse suspicion.

He had Flooed from his bedroom at Grimmauld Place to the Leaky Cauldron and gotten a room for himself. He was now standing in said room, grateful and hopeful for the privacy it afforded him. Having just changed clothes, Regulus now prepared himself to take the Polyjuice Potion Dumbledore had supplied for him. He added the dark brown hairs and drank, disgusted at the flavor.

He watched himself transform before his eyes into a much older and bulkier man. He had a beard, which itched, and his hair was unkempt

and hanging in his eyes. Regulus sneered at his reflection and tried to brush the hair out of his face. With a sigh, he turned away from the mirror and made his way down the stairs.

People in the pub didn't give him a second glance as he passed through the crowd and into the back, where he tapped on the bricks to gain entrance to Diagon Alley. Since it was January and a bitterly cold evening, few people graced the streets. Regulus proceeded down the nearly-empty road until he reached the side street that led to Knockturn Alley. He made the turn and continued on.

Figuring he was supposed to be portraying an unsavory wizard, Regulus walked with a purpose. The man he resembled wasn't even a wizard, according to Dumbledore, but was a random Muggle from the countryside. Regulus hoped no one would question his being here.

He received suspicious looks from a few people, but everyone regarded each other that way in Knockturn Alley. The few times he had been here, he had been told to mind his own business and keep his eyes straight ahead. As a boy, Regulus had come here with his father, and he had been here one time more recently after having joined Voldemort.

Finding the apothecary, Regulus entered and pretended to take an interest in the rare and dangerous herbs lining the shelves. Dead bats and rats hung from the ceiling, and Regulus had to keep himself from making a face of disgust.

He was the only one in the shop, and so, arousing suspicion, the proprietor shouted from behind the counter, "Anything I can do for you, Mister-?"

"Mister Snibbs," Regulus replied gruffly. "And yes, actually..."

He approached the shop owner, who kept gazing upon Regulus as if he didn't trust him and had absolutely no reason to trust him.

"I've never seen you before," the owner accused.

"I've just come from the United States," Regulus replied, able to pull off a convincing American accent. "That'd be why."

"Hmph," the other man muttered. "Well, what d'you want? D'you know even where you are, stranger?"

"Yeah, Knockturn Alley," Regulus said. "I'm in the right place. I came here for something important... something I was hoping you could help me with."

"Is that right? Well, I don't know how much I can help you." Gazing upon Regulus's appearance, the man made an assumption about his motivation for coming to Knockturn Alley. "Many come to Knockturn Alley seeking pleasure and enjoyment. If it's a good shag you're lookin' for, there's a pub down the street filled with whores and all the whiskey a man could want."

Regulus knew the man was trying to get him out of his shop, so he played along for now. Forcing a laugh, he replied, "Thank you, sir, but I'm afraid that will have to wait. You see, what I'm seeking is... basilisk venom."

"Basilisk venom?" the owner laughed. "There hasn't been report of a basilisk in at least a half a century, maybe longer. You don't just come walkin' into any old shop askin' for basilisk venom."

"But this isn't 'any old shop,'" Regulus pointed out. "I've heard great things about Knockturn Alley. Besides, I'm willing to pay any price."

The proprietor raised his eyebrows. "Any price?" he inquired skeptically.

"You heard right. Judging by the appearance of things here, I assume you could use the money." Regulus gazed at the dusty shelves with disinterest.

"I'll have you know I do plenty of business," the owner nearly shouted, outraged. "Surely you've heard of the one they call You-Know-Who? Even a stranger like you would've heard of him."

"Oh, yes, I've heard of him. Smart man, that one." Regulus smiled.

Regulus didn't know for sure if the apothecary's owner supported the Dark Lord, but since Death Eaters and other Dark wizards were the ones who frequented his shop, he depended on them for his business. If for no other reason, the proprietor likely supported Voldemort. Regulus tried to gauge the other man's reaction to his statement.

"Why should I do this for you, stranger?" he posed, his face indifferent.

Stepping forward a few steps, Regulus withdrew a satchel filled with gold coins and placed it on the counter in front of the other man. "Consider this my down payment... a guarantee that I'm serious and to ensure your confidence and quick service in this matter."

The owner picked up the sack and poured the Galleons into his hand, eyeing them greedily. "Very well," he replied. "Where can I contact you?"

"That won't be necessary. I'll check back in a week."

Nodding, the proprietor said, "It's been a pleasure doing business with you... Mr. Snibbs."

Returning the nod, Regulus stepped out of the shop and back into the streets. He made his way back to the Leaky Cauldron and to his room. Glad to be back to his privacy, he stared at his reflection as the Polyjuice wore off, grateful to look upon his own face again. He heard a buzzing noise, and his eyes caught the reflection of a bee near the window.

Chapter One Hundred-Sixteen

A few days after his trip to Diagon Alley, Regulus was in his bedroom back at Grimmauld Place, waiting and wondering if the owner of the apothecary would have procured the basilisk venom by the time he returned in three days. The whole week had been filled with anxiety on his part, and he hoped he had been successful. Judging by the state of things, Voldemort seemed to be gaining power by the day, and Regulus didn't know how much longer he could take being a spy. He could feel his life wavering on the line between safety and condemnation.

It was true that Dumbledore had been satisfied with his work in Knockturn Alley that day, but Regulus hadn't been in contact with the headmaster since that evening. He had nothing new to report, and Dumbledore hadn't called on him.

In his frustration, Regulus stopped pacing and flopped onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling for several long minutes. He could hear the ticking of the clock on his desk nearby, and his eyes drifted to the object, watching as the second hand rotated agonizingly slowly around the face. He felt his eyelids growing heavy in his boredom and was just above to slip into sleep when a jolt from the Dark Mark alerted him.

Sitting bolt-upright in bed, Regulus grabbed at the mark in pain. He hissed and stood, taking his cloak from its place draped over the desk's chair and threw it around himself. He reached for his mask and black robe and Disapparated.

It wouldn't do to keep his master waiting.

Regulus pulled on his mask and robe, concealing his identity among all the others, identically dressed. He took his place in the back, being one of the youngest Death Eaters.

When everyone had arrived, Voldemort stood in the center of the circle and greeted them, and Regulus listened as the Dark Lord went on about his usual claims to take over the world and whatnot. All these pointless words were simply meant to rally his followers, so

Regulus didn't take much interest in them. They were nearly the same every time.

What followed would be plans worth taking note of, so Regulus focused his attention on Voldemort as the evil wizard continued.

"Yes, we have come very far," Voldemort was saying, "but the question begs - Are you all truly faithful followers? The time has come when your loyalty will be tested. Victory is on the cusp. Surely you all wish to be present to celebrate it with me?"

Everyone was nodding and murmuring their agreement, and Regulus played along, but suddenly, Voldemort's voice interrupted, cold and angry, "But I have reason to believe you are not all so loyal... or that you haven't all been completely honest, at least. Regulus Black, why don't you step forward?"

For a second, Regulus thought he had misheard. The Dark Lord's voice echoed in his ears, and realization struck him. He felt his stomach clench and hoped he could muster up enough courage and cunning to evade Voldemort's suspicion. Steeling himself, he stepped forward through the ranks, ignoring the whispers around him and came to stand in front of his lord.

He bowed and kissed the hem of Voldemort's robe. "Master," he murmured.

"You may stand and face me like a proper wizard," Voldemort instructed.

Regulus didn't say anything, but nodded and did as asked. As he gazed into Voldemort's reddish eyes, he tried his best to keep his composure calm and collected. Voldemort stared straight into Regulus's eyes, and a moment later, Regulus felt a push on his mind. Putting his Occlumency into action, Regulus kept from the Dark Lord what he most likely wanted to see. The probing continued for several minutes, and Regulus began to feel his ability to keep the Dark Lord out waver. Suddenly, the memory of his recent trip to Knockturn Alley played out, and Regulus tried not to cringe and cry out.

Finally, Voldemort retracted and surveyed Regulus. He seemed too cool and relaxed for Regulus to believe it real.

"So," Voldemort eventually stated, "you were in Knockturn Alley trying to procure basilisk venom just a few days ago. A most interesting thing to be doing, don't you think? One might wonder why," he cut in sharply, "you would be needing such a thing, unless you have been up to something you shouldn't be."

Regulus didn't say anything.

"And using Polyjuice to hide your identity to top that... I can understand not wishing to be caught by the Aurors or one of Dumbledore's little friends, but surely visiting a place like Knockturn Alley wouldn't make such a thing necessary? What have you been hiding from me, Regulus Black?"

"Nothing, my master," Regulus lied through his teeth.

"Lies!" Voldemort hissed, now letting his rage show. "You were foolish enough to get caught by one of my spies, and you cannot deny what you were doing in Knockturn Alley. I never asked you to procure basilisk venom for me, so you have no business doing so. This is not the only time you have done something behind my back. Does stealing something from your cousin sound familiar?"

Regulus felt his insides turn to ice. Without realizing what he was doing, he frantically searched the gathered crowd of Death Eaters for Bellatrix and Lucius, but couldn't tell them apart from anyone else.

Narcissa hadn't kept his secret after all!

"Bella was foolish to have told you anything... or to have told anyone for that matter," Voldemort continued, glaring at the Death Eater who had to be Bellatrix. "Regardless, your story is feeble. I intend to find out what else you have been doing, and if you have indeed done so, you have ruined something I've worked years on doing. Whether or not that is the case, you wouldn't be here to know it!"

Regulus wanted to run, to disappear. He tried, in vain, to Disapparate, but he knew it was useless. He resorted to the last thing he could do. He fell to his knees, prostrate in front of Voldemort, and begged.

"Please, my lord! I swear to you - I have only been loyal to you! What I've done, I've done because I thought it best to protect you and in your best interests! I'm sorry that I did it behind your back, but my first thoughts were always of you!"

"Lies! All lies!" Voldemort bellowed. "Crucio!"

Regulus now fell all the way to the ground, his body shaking in uncontrollable pain. After Voldemort ended the curse, Regulus's body was left twitching, and he gazed at those around him. Bellatrix had removed her mask and stepped closer to him.

Kneeling next to him, Bellatrix whispered, "You disappoint me, cousin. And here I trusted you."

She stood again and pointed her wand at Regulus, not a hint of sorrow on her features as she hit him with the Cruciatus. She held it even longer than Voldemort, and when she finally relented, Regulus thought he must have lost his mind. Thoughts weren't coming as clearly anymore.

"One more thing," Voldemort said almost conversationally. "You may be wondering how I found you out. Ever heard of an Animagus? A shame you didn't look more carefully, because a bee fluttering about in the middle of winter would have been a dead giveaway to another with half a brain. You are a waste."

Regulus felt his heart sinking, and his last thought before everything ended were hopes that the world might one day be a little better because he'd done his small part.

"Just... do... it..." Regulus croaked.

"Avada Kedavra!" Voldemort yelled, and a green bolt of light shot from his wand, hitting Regulus squarely in the chest.

The boy of only eighteen stopped moving.

Voldemort might have chuckled under different circumstances, but if his suspicions were correct - if Regulus had figured out the Horcruxes - then he would need to move fast to kill the one who the prophecy marked as his equal.

"Enough," he told his followers. "You have seen what happens to those who are disloyal. In a few days' time, I will be making a bold move, a move which will cement our position to take over the wizarding world, once and for all. You are dismissed."

One by one, the Death Eaters seemed to pop out of existence. Voldemort was left to contemplate what he wanted to have done with Regulus's body. He decided sending it directly to Dumbledore would be a clear message.

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The following morning, Severus and Lily were awakened by a somewhat panicked voice calling them from downstairs. Throwing on house robes, they left their bedroom and went to find out what the problem was. Severus was shocked to see Dumbledore standing in their sitting room. He hadn't even recognized Dumbledore's voice at first, since he rarely ever heard the headmaster this upset. That, combined with having just woken, made Severus startled and confused.

Lily was right behind him, holding her belly from further exertion.

"What's the matter?" Severus asked, now alarmed.

"Regulus is dead," Dumbledore replied, shaking his head.

Severus and Lily's mouths were hanging open slightly.

"This... just can't be," Lily stated in disbelief. "What happened? Was he found out?"

"It would appear so. Voldemort took the liberty of sending his body to me as proof. I have already checked. It is indeed Regulus."

"Then what does this mean for the Order?" Lily questioned in a small voice.

"For one thing, it means Regulus wasn't successful in procuring the basilisk venom," Severus pointed out grimly. "Do you suppose Voldemort suspects?"

"That could very well be the case," Dumbledore confirmed, "which is all the more reason we need to destroy the remaining Horcruxes."

"Let me do it, sir. Let me get the venom. I know-"

"Severus, no!" Lily intervened shrilly. "Are you mental? Look what happened to Regulus! You are not risking your life like that!" She gazed imploringly at Dumbledore. "There must be another way," she nearly begged.

Severus sighed and didn't press the point.

"There may be," Dumbledore replied, "but it would be extremely dangerous. While waiting on the venom, I did much thinking about the experiences I've had with Dark Magic. Years ago, I was friends with Grindelwald-"

"What?" Lily asked, aghast. "But I thought you defeated him years ago? Weren't you enemies?"

"Not always," Dumbledore admitted, obviously ashamed. "I was initially blinded by his ideas, but then saw the truth. The point is, he was a master at many spells I haven't ever tried myself. I have never actually done Dark Magic, but I was tempted as a young man, very tempted. Because of that, I have stayed away from it-"

"That's all very well and good, Dumbledore," interrupted Severus impatiently, "but what method are you referring to? How do you propose we destroy the Horcruxes?"

"Fiendfyre," Dumbledore said, almost too simply. "We owe it to Regulus to finish this work."

"We also need that bastard gone, preferably before my son is born," Severus said savagely. "Very well, Fiendfyre. Any idea how to control it if you've never used it?" He had heard of Fiendfyre, after all, but had no experience with it.

"I will need to be somewhere where no one else will be hurt. Should something happen to me-"

"Don't say that, sir... please!" Lily pleaded. "We've just lost Regulus. The thought-"

"My dear," Dumbledore said gently, "I know it's hard to hear, but it's a very real possibility."

Realizing that Dumbledore might very well lose his life when trying to handle Fiendfyre, Severus felt he had better make his peace with the old wizard now... just in case.

Severus stepped forward a bit and addressed the headmaster. "Sir, I know we haven't always seen eye to eye, but you-" He paused, not sure how to express himself properly. "I mean, you and I..."

Dumbledore smiled slightly, perhaps bemused by Severus's attempt at gratitude. He placed a hand on the younger man's shoulder and looked him in the eyes.

"It's okay, my boy. You don't have to say anything. I already know. You..." as Dumbledore said this, he turned to Lily and addressed her, too, "you both have made me proud. I have no doubt that when the time comes, you will finish Voldemort forever. I have lived a long life and known many wizards and witches, but you have shown the very best of humanity in your selfless actions."

Lily's cheeks were now drenched with tears, and even Severus felt the sting in his eyes. Blinking several times, he replied, "You'd better tell me your plan, then. We will need to follow up... just in case."

No one uttered the words, but death, it seemed, was hanging over them and might persist for some time.

Author's Note: Yes, I can already hear you hating me for killing Regulus, asking, "Why? Why did you do it?!" Try not to hate me too much, as you need me to finish this story, but let me explain: I never saw Regulus surviving this fic. I'm sorry, but that's my opinion. I like him very much, and he was fun to write, but unfortunately, the spy always winds up dying, some way, somehow. Some of you pretty much had it pegged that Reg would die from the beginning, and I know many, many of you are fond of him. So... I'm sorry, truly! No flames, please.

I think I kind of set that up in the previous chapter and had a lot of you worried, anyway.

You're now asking: Will Dumbledore die? I won't tell you, so please don't ask. You'll just have to read the next chapter (in a few days) to see.

On a whole different subject, this is late, but I wanted to share some lovely artwork LilyHBP did for chapter 111: <http://lilyhbp.deviantart.com/art/Departing-102744035> (remove spaces). Thank you, Lily!

Finally, happy Thanksgiving to any American readers out there! (I extend that to everyone else, but since you don't celebrate it, you probably wouldn't know the difference). :)

Chapter One Hundred-Seventeen

Had the Dumbledore in this timeline been a little older, he would have already mastered Fiendfyre. Unbeknownst to Severus, the headmaster had used the fire mere hours before his demise when he had been in the cave with Harry. He had driven away a pack of Inferi with it.

As it was, this Dumbledore was perfectly capable of learning a new trick or two. In desperate times, the oft-used saying went that desperate measures may need to be taken. This was such a time.

After departing the Snapes' company, Dumbledore returned to Hogwarts, intent on opening the Room of Requirement later that day. Such a place would afford him the privacy he would need, and it would be safe, cut off from the rest of the castle in its own magical way.

Before any further Horcrux destruction, however, Dumbledore had to tell Regulus's family the horrible news. While he wasn't looking forward to speaking with Orion and Walburga Black, he was deeply saddened to have to notify Sirius. Sirius would deserve to know before his parents, as Dumbledore knew the elder Blacks wouldn't permit their older son anywhere near Regulus's funeral.

Since James had married Mary and gotten his own flat, Sirius had moved out of the Potter mansion as well, and he was now living in the same flat complex as Remus Lupin. Dumbledore didn't usually call on Sirius for things, but knowing his location, all he had to do was overcome his grief enough to make the gesture of creating the Floo connection.

Uttering quietly, mournfully pitiful for his formidable voice, Dumbledore tossed the Floo Powder half-heartedly into the fireplace. "Sirius Black's place."

The connection made, Dumbledore stuck his bearded head into the green flames and searched for Sirius. He didn't immediately spot him, so he called out for him, but to no avail. Not surprised that Sirius

would be visiting his friend, Dumbledore proceeded onto the next logical dwelling.

He found Sirius and Remus sharing a late breakfast at the kitchen table, laughter echoing off the walls.

"Dumbledore!" they exclaimed in unison, happy to see him.

"What a pleasant surprise," Sirius said, much more welcoming than Severus would be toward the old wizard for intruding.

"Good morning, you two," Dumbledore returned, trying to keep his voice calm. "Unfortunately, I don't come bearing good news."

Seeing the look on the old wizard's face, Sirius frowned. "What's happened?" he asked sharply.

"Sirius, if you would be so kind as to come to my office-"

Sirius glanced at Remus. "Can Remus come?"

"If he wishes."

Remus gave Sirius a nod, the merriment from his face disappearing. The two young men left their breakfast unfinished and headed toward the fireplace. Dumbledore withdrew and allowed them passage into his office.

"If you're calling on me directly, sir, I assume something happened to my brother? Why else would you ask me here?" Sirius ventured, already fearing for the worst.

"Sirius, I am sorry-" Dumbledore started to say, but Sirius held up his hand, silencing him.

With his other hand, he grasped at his face, as if unsure what to do with himself, and then shielded his eyes, like he was standing in uncomfortably bright sunlight.

"You don't have to finish," he said, his voice slightly strangled. "I knew it... would happen. That... bloody... idiot." Suddenly, his hand dropped, and he glared around the room in anguish, his grief culminating in anger. "What did that bastard think would happen by joining the Death Eaters? No one gets out alive; he should've realized that before he joined! So, tell me what happened, Dumbledore. What moronic thing did my little prodigy brother do to get himself killed?"

"Sirius," Remus pleaded softly, trying to reach for his friend's shoulder, but Sirius refused any comfort, pulling away.

With a sigh, Remus relented and gazed upon Dumbledore. "What happened?" he asked.

"He was found out by Voldemort," Dumbledore said with all honesty. "Voldemort sent his... sent him here to personally deliver the message."

"Where is he?" Sirius questioned, now sounding hollow.

"I will take you to him..."

Dumbledore went to Sirius and placed a gnarled hand on his upper back, gently guiding him into the adjacent room.

Remus held back and watched as his friend stood there a moment in disbelief, before crossing the room and falling to his knees in front of the brother he hoped he had understood better.

Sirius wept for the brother he wished he had truly known. He would have been honored to call him brother now.

x x x x x

Later that day, James, Mary, Sirius, and Remus were gathered in the sitting room at Spinner's End. Lily had deliberated on inviting Petunia, but Sirius didn't seem in the mood for company. His normally flirtatious manner was glum and withdrawn, and while a small toast had been shared in Regulus's honor, Sirius had taken to holding the bottle of whiskey in his hand and insisting on pouring himself glass after glass. No one tried to stop him.

Mary was now expecting as well, so both Lily and she had abstained from the alcohol. Baby talk was not in the air for once. How could they speak of new life when the life of one so young had just ended?

"Makes you wonder who's next," Sirius was saying, his speech beginning to slur. "How many Order members've died now? What's the count, Moony?" He looked at Remus, who frowned, and then turned to James. "Prongs? C'mon, mate! Enlighten me! We all know it's mounting by the day!"

"Sirius," James replied warily. He flicked his wand, Summoning the bottle. At Sirius's protest, he said, "I think you've had enough."

"It's never enough dead for Voldemort, though, is it?" demanded Sirius. "So, what's a little more whiskey? Let me mourn in my own way, damn it!"

"Sirius, mate, I know you're upset, but you're going to regret this in a few hours when you're sicking up. I'd hold your hair out of your face as you lean over the toilet and all, but you're still going to be in for a long night," Remus explained.

Sirius leaned back into the chair and crossed his arms, glaring into the fire, but didn't say anything.

"I think I have something that can help with the hangover," Severus supplied, standing and exiting the room before anyone could say anything.

He proceeded down the stairs to the basement to his work table and shelves of personal potions. He found the correct vial and took his from its spot. He shook his head, wondering himself if all this talk of death would only set circumstances as such that Dumbledore joined so many before him. Severus found himself clenching the tiny bottle tightly and was half-tempted to hurl it across the room at the wall.

Hadn't enough people died in wars in both of his lives?

Instead, he turned sharply on his heel and headed back upstairs. He entered the room and immediately crossed the space to where Sirius was seated.

"Take this now," Severus instructed, holding the vial out for him.

"Going to poison me, so I can join my brother, Snape?" Sirius asked humorously.

"That's not funny, Padfoot," Remus interjected.

Sirius eyed the potion distrustfully and shook his head. "I don't want it. Maybe I'm supposed to feel like this-

"Oh, snap out of it, Black!" Severus yelled impatiently. "You're mourning, fine, but what the hell do you think it'll accomplish by drinking yourself into a stupor? Don't be an idiot! That's what your friends have been trying to tell you all night, but they've just been too polite to tell it to you like it is."

"Severus," Lily said worriedly, "maybe that's a little harsh-

"Harsh, maybe, but it's the truth," Severus stated. He glared at the others in the room. "What do you expect would happen? You knew what would happen when you joined the Order, what you were risking - your very lives. This is a war, in case you missed it years ago."

"Wait a minute here," James shot out hotly, standing as well. "You have no right to tell Sirius how to mourn. He's just lost his brother. How'd you feel if Lily were killed? Should we expect you to just 'snap out of it', as you so bluntly put it? Give the man some time to bloody mourn, Severus! Regulus was murdered less than a day ago!"

Severus didn't say a word. Instead, he withdrew from the room once again, only he went upstairs this time. He slammed the door shut and dropped onto the bed, resting his elbows on his knees as he leaned forward.

A minute later, Lily was at his side.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asked gently.

"What's there to talk about?" he shot back, staring at his fingers.

"Severus, really... I know Sirius was being irresponsible by drinking like that, but he's not harming anyone. James made a good point. What if it were me instead who died?"

"Don't... say... that..." Severus ground out, struggling with every word. "You cannot possibly know... no!" He withdrew his face from his hands and gazed desperately upon Lily, grabbing her shoulders more fiercely than he meant. "It's getting close, so close, Lily. Do you see it? Dumbledore will destroy the remaining Horcruxes, whether he dies in the attempt or not, but the Fiendfyre will do its job. Voldemort has to suspect that Regulus knew about the Horcruxes now, and he's going to go searching for them. When he finds they're destroyed, he will come for us. He will find a way... and I'm going to kill him... or die trying. He's not going to kill you again, Lily!"

"Severus, calm down," Lily tried to reason. The memories from Severus's other life played through her mind, and she gasped.

"What is it?"

"How did Voldemort even find out the prophecy meant you? Haven't you been wondering that all these months?" she questioned in a fearful, small voice.

"Of course, but-"

"Your memories, Severus... they're in my mind, too, now. If only Dumbledore and I know the truth about you reliving your life, Voldemort had to have found out from one of us. Almost a year ago, when he grabbed me in the pub and looked into my eyes, do you think he saw?"

Severus swallowed. "I- I cannot say. What were you thinking about then?"

"I feared for your life, of course," she said. "I can't recall the exact thoughts-"

"I don't know, Lily," Severus replied, sounding worn out. "It doesn't really matter how he found out. The fact is that he knows, and if I'm right - if he figures out his Horcruxes are gone, he will come for us, and soon. Black was wondering who would be next on the death list. If not Dumbledore, then..."

"Don't you dare say it, Severus," Lily interrupted strongly.

Severus was silenced. He shook his head, no words of reassurance to be found.

After a few minutes of continued silence, Lily took Severus by the hand, coaxing him to stand.

"Come on, Sev," she urged gently. "We do have guests, and... let's just try to make the best of this all, shall we?" Lily gave him a small smile of encouragement, which Severus tried to return.

"Very well," he agreed, having regained some of his composure.

They headed back downstairs, and upon entering the sitting room, found a sober Sirius. The empty vial sat on the coffee table in front of him.

Severus avoided the other man's gaze as Lily led him to a seat, and she broke the awkward silence by saying, "Wouldn't you all stay for dinner, please? It's bad enough that we're together because of such dire circumstances, but the weather is nasty outside, and I, for one, can't really think of a better way to spend a day like this than among friends."

Remus, encouraged by Lily's tone, brightened slightly, sitting up straighter. "That would be nice, Lily. Thank you."

Lily looked expectantly upon the others, and Mary nodded. "I'll help you prepare dinner if you wish."

"Thanks, Mary. That'd be appreciated," replied Lily.

James gave his nod of consent and squeezed his wife's hand. When only Sirius didn't reply, Lily pressed, "Sirius?"

Sirius finally looked up from his previous gaze at the floor. His shoulders slumped, and then he shrugged. "Does he want me here?" he asked cautiously, gesturing toward Severus.

Severus turned his face toward Sirius for the first time upon returning and said levelly, "I must... apologize for the tone I took with you earlier, Black. You do realize I was only trying to help?"

"I, er... yeah. Thanks for the potion, by the way." Sirius, although uncomfortable with the eyes of everyone on him, finally gave in. "All right. Maybe you might consider inviting your sister, too, Lily?"

Heartened by Sirius's response, Lily stood. "Okay, then."

She met her husband's eyes and exchanged a look of understanding.

Better together than apart.

x x x x x

Several hours later, while the younger generation was able to find something to celebrate in their togetherness in these dark times, Dumbledore was alone in his office at Hogwarts. The three remaining Horcruxes sat in front of him on his desk: the locket, the cup, and the diadem.

He had already told Professor McGonagall what he was planning on doing, much to her shock and dismay. Someone needed to know, though. He trusted her to run the school if something should happen to him, but he also trusted her to keep the secret of the Horcruxes to herself and the few who knew about them.

Should he somehow fail to destroy them today, someone would need to finish what he had started.

Dumbledore exchanged a sorrowful glance with Fawkes, who was perched nearby and gazing almost forlornly back at his master.

"You have been a constant companion, Fawkes," Dumbledore told the bird, who seemed to understand him. "This may be goodbye, my old friend."

Dumbledore stood and gathered the Horcruxes, securing them in his pockets. He went to Fawkes and placed a hand upon his head, petting him.

Fawkes trilled softly, morosely.

"Be good, then," Dumbledore murmured. With one last pat, he left Fawkes and exited the office.

He found the corridor where he would gain entrance to the Room of Requirement and thought long and hard about what he desired. After a couple of minutes, a door appeared, and Dumbledore stepped into a cavernous room, empty and vast. Its walls appeared to be composed of stone, and Dumbledore knew the room would keep the fire contained.

He walked to the middle of the room and set the Horcruxes on the ground. He envisioned Grindelwald playing with Fiendfyre at the mere age of eighteen, so long ago. Dumbledore shook his head. A part of him had been intrigued... and still was.

He spoke the incantation and performed the wand motions he remembered his old friend employing all those years ago, and the fire erupted from the tip of his wand, forming a long, snake-like thread. Dumbledore stepped back, keeping his wand out and his mind steady, imagining what he wanted the fire to do. The fire twisted and turned, as if it had its own emotions and will to disobey, but Dumbledore held onto it like an owner with his leash on a dog.

You will obey me. You will destroy the Horcruxes.

Then, with a sudden and violent jerk, the fire turned into a lion, which charged toward the Horcruxes. Its mouth opened, and with a blaze of

furious flames, the fire danced and sizzled. It finished its work, leaving the Horcruxes damaged, destroyed.

With a whoop of joy, Dumbledore momentarily lost control of the fire, which continued to streak toward him. Suddenly realizing his folly, Dumbledore jumped out of its path with the energy of a much younger man, and he held out his wand again, commanding the fire to bend to his will.

You have finished what you were summoned to do. You have done well. Now, lessen your anger and abate.

The fire stopped its charge and appeared reluctant to obey, like a pouty child, but Dumbledore held his wand and power strongly, and the fire finally submitted, growing smaller, until it disappeared with a spark.

Dumbledore smiled. He could feel victory amongst the death.

Chapter One Hundred-Eighteen

After everyone had left that evening and the hour was very late, Severus and Lily remained in the sitting room for some time, mulling over the events of the past day. Petunia's presence had helped brighten Sirius's spirits, and much to Lily's contentment, her sister had smiled more than she had seen in a long time.

Lily eventually stood from her well-indented spot on the sofa and stretched, murmuring something about cleaning up in the kitchen. Severus said he would help and stood as well, intent on following her. Before Lily walked more than ten steps, though, she felt the baby kick inside her and stopped.

"Sev, come here and feel," Lily said, the softness of her voice tinged with excitement.

Severus had felt the baby kick before, but he didn't mind feeling the life they had created again. He chose this time to kneel in front of her, and placing a hand on each side of her bulging stomach, pressed his ear against the mass and listened... and felt.

He smiled, and Lily gazed down upon her husband's cherished head and echoed his smile, setting a hand on top of his hair and gently running her fingers through the locks.

"It never ceases to amaze me," Severus breathed, closing his eyes, "that you married someone like me and wanted to have a child together, Lily."

He opened his eyes again and stared up at his wife, who cradled his face in her hands. She contemplated him for a moment, and then he stood, taking her hand and leading her toward the stairway.

"Don't be so amazed, Sev," Lily replied as they began their ascent. "Who wouldn't want to spend the rest of their life with their best friend?"

They stopped briefly by the baby's room and then proceeded ahead to their own bedroom. As they settled in for the night, Severus

wondered if Dumbledore had been successful in destroying the Horcruxes and if the man still lived. He certainly hoped so.

The following morning, Dumbledore called on the Snapes quite early. Severus half-thought he was looking at a ghost when Dumbledore entered through the fireplace. Lily, so overcome with joy upon seeing the aged headmaster, actually threw her arms around him.

"You're alive!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, and I have good news to report. All of the Horcruxes have been done away with," replied Dumbledore, twinkling madly at Lily as he removed himself from her grasp.

Lily stepped back, a little flushed with embarrassment as her display of affection. She beamed, and Severus quirked a smile.

"Excellent, sir," he stated. Sobering, he added, "But of course that means, as you already suspected because he murdered Regulus, that Voldemort knows his Horcruxes have been destroyed."

"Yes, I'm afraid it won't be long now before he comes calling," Dumbledore agreed. "It would be prudent to remain home as much as possible. Severus, perhaps, for the time being, you had better notify your employer that you need an extended leave of absence?" Seeing the expression of dismay on the young man's face, Dumbledore hastily amended, "You may do as you wish, of course, but out of concern for your lives, I say this. We have come so far, both with the war and with our understanding of each other, I think, and I do not want things to end badly."

Severus was silent. He knew Dumbledore was right, but he loathed the thought of being holed up at Spinner's End.

"But he needs to be killed before he makes another Horcruxe, or several," Severus pointed out. "Wouldn't it be better to go on the offensive, rather than hiding and waiting for him to figure out a way to find us?"

"The war continues as we speak, Severus," Dumbledore explained. "You know this, and I am glad you have let some of the other Order members do the fighting. You have already done so much-"

"But the prophecy claims I must be the one to do it... or my son, which is too risky, and since he isn't even born yet, I'm not going to sit by and wait and watch-"

Severus felt his temper breaking, and only Lily's soft hand taking his own calmed him enough to sigh and continue, "At least consider what I'm suggesting, Dumbledore."

"Very well," Dumbledore conceded.

"I will also take into account what you're suggesting," Severus said levelly.

He heard Lily release a sigh of relief next to him.

"I will be in touch," Dumbledore said before departing.

Once Dumbledore was gone, Lily reassured her husband, "At least now I wouldn't have to be alone at home. I'd much rather have you here, Severus, than worry about you every time you leave the house."

Although it wasn't the first time Lily had spoken of wishing him home, Severus knew the danger of stepping out beyond their house's walls had just increased immensely.

x x x x x

Voldemort was angrier than anyone had witnessed in a long, long time. Shortly after disposing of that traitor, Regulus Black, he set upon searching out his Horcruxes and checking to see if they were intact. His first destination was the cave, and seeing the false locket sitting on the bottom of the basin instead, Voldemort bellowed in fury, throwing the locket to the ground and releasing his emotions upon the Inferi. He immediately charged them out of the cave, releasing them on the nearest towns.

Little Hangleton was next. In the middle of the night, a great cry went up as the Dark Lord expressed his outrage once again. He set fire to the remains of his ancestors' dilapidated house and proceeded to Lucius Malfoy's manor. He already knew the cup was missing from the Lestrangle house, so there was no point in even checking there, and chances of gaining access to Hogwarts while Dumbledore still lived were near to impossible.

At Malfoy Manor, the Lestranges and Malfoys watched with trepidation as Voldemort threw down the ruined diary. He turned on his own followers, hitting them with several bouts of the Cruciatus Curse for their failure. He did not even spare Narcissa, who was pregnant. What did Voldemort care of the unborn child inside her?

"You fools! You idiots! You're a disgrace to my cause! If I didn't need you for this war, I'd do away with you just as I have that traitor! What good is your supposed loyalty, your empty professions of duty, when you fail me just as Black has?!"

He ranted for another minute and then released his followers from his wrath-by-wand.

"P-please, Master," Bellatrix said shakily. "It w-was a terrible and unforgiveable mistake, w-what I've done. I beg your forgiveness, p-please. You know I l-live to serve only y-you."

"We shall see," Voldemort sneered, glaring at those gathered in front of him. "You are to attack as many homes of the Order of the Phoenix and their family members as possible. I want it done within the next three days, do you understand? I grow tired of waiting."

"But, my lord," Lucius groveled. "They keep themselves protected and hidden from us by the strongest of enchantments-"

"I'll hear no excuses!" Voldemort bellowed. "Only by doing away with as many of those who have signed up for Dumbledore's cause as possible will I think of showing mercy. You are to gather the others and tell them that I insist they assist you."

"And what of you, my master?" Bellatrix asked in a small voice.

"Do not concern yourselves with me," Voldemort hissed. "I have my own score to settle."

His eyes glowed red, and then he disappeared with a crack. Voldemort reappeared on the outskirts of Manchester, just as dawn broke. While Severus and Lily mourned and celebrated with their friends at Spinner's End that day, Voldemort, concealed as a common Muggle, was walking the streets of the city.

He knew the Snapes lived in that city. He was determined to find them and finish them...

x x x x x

By the following morning, the same morning Dumbledore visited Severus and Lily, the Death Eaters were undertaking the mission Voldemort has entrusted them with. Because of desperation for their lives, they managed to figure out how to gain access to many homes, although luckily, the Order fought back strongly.

After leaving Spinner's End, Dumbledore was alerted to these attacks and joined in the resistance. By the end of the day, many more had fallen on either side. Reports of the Inferi wreaking havoc on Muggles came in by the boatload, as well as the death counts by Death Eaters.

Severus felt useless to it all.

"So, now what do we do? Stand by and let this war escalate?" he asked Lily.

Lily had no satisfying answer for this and instead posed her own concerns in the form of questions. "What about our families, Sev? Do you think the Untraceable Charm will hold?"

"It should, but if you're worried, Lily, we can offer to let them stay here." Severus didn't know how well it would go over to have three more people staying in their small home, but if it may Lily feel better, he was willing to accomodate them.

"Well, if you think the charm will hold," Lily said, her voice uncertain. "I'm going to check on them..."

Her voice drifted off as she crossed the room to the fireplace. Severus watched as Lily stuck her head into the flames and spoke with her family, and since she remained in that position for some time, he assumed they were all right.

Thoughts of Tobias entered his mind. After Lily finished speaking with her own family, she said, "They insisted on staying in their home."

Severus strongly suspected Lily was verging on wanting to magically remove her parents and sister from their home and bring them to Spinner's End. Her face had a set determination, a refusal to be convinced of their safety, and a fear of the worst.

"As much as it pains me to say this, Lily, you cannot make them do anything against their will. I know you care about them, but if they wish to stay there, you ought to abide by their wishes."

"I'd never resort to using the Imperius Curse, Severus," Lily stated sternly, crossing her arms in defense and dejection.

"I'm not saying that," Severus pointed out carefully. He pulled her toward him, her back resting against his chest. "I am thinking I should check on my father, too."

Lily nodded and followed her husband into the sitting room. Severus called on Tobias, but no one answered. Exchanging a worried look with Lily, Severus stepped through the grate and into Tobias's flat, which sat still. He hadn't filled it with much more furniture since the last time Severus had visited.

Checking the bedroom, Severus failed to find his father and mentally cursed.

"He had better hope he's not caught," he muttered.

I should have kept a better eye on him, Severus thought in concern.

"What do you want to do?" Lily asked quietly.

"We need to return home. It's getting late, and it would only be more unsafe to venture outside now," Severus explained. "Let's just hope he's okay."

The Snapes returned home, uncertainty and foreboding invading their minds and hearts.

Author's Note: The pregnant Narcissa being Crucioed is from Matt Quinn's fic, *The Wrath of the Half-Blood Prince*.

Chapter One Hundred-Nineteen

Sleep seemed impossible that night.

Severus resorted to pacing instead.

"If he returned to the pubs-" he started to say, vexation and anguish in his tone.

"It's only nine o'clock, Severus," Lily reasoned.

"Not very late, true, but late enough. What's he got to do on a January night at this hour? The shops are closed for the most part."

"Maybe he went to get some groceries?" Lily suggested.

"Unlikely," Severus muttered, unconvinced.

He halted his pacing and gazed across the room at his wife, taking in the dark circles around her eyes.

"It's not good for you to be up this late, Lily. Maybe you ought to try and get some sleep. You can take a potion if you like."

"And what about you, Severus?"

"I think it would be prudent to stay awake and keep an eye out tonight. With all the attacks today, something is definitely up."

"I don't think I could sleep if I tried," Lily confessed, "and I don't like the idea of a potion-induced sleep, leaving you down here alone. No, I'm staying up with you. Besides, I don't think the potion would be good for the baby."

Sighing, Severus realized she was right and muttered, "I may as well make some coffee, then."

He marched into the kitchen and busied himself with the preparation of the coffee. Lily took a seat on the sofa and rested her hands on her

belly, staring down at it. She smoothed her hands over her abdomen and murmured sweet nothings to the baby.

She then looked up and gazed across the room and into the kitchen at her husband.

"Do you suppose Voldemort will be destroyed before he's born? Our baby, that is, Sev?" she queried.

The coffee ready, Severus was in the process of pouring two cups, when he replied, "Let us hope. I don't want our child being born into a world where Voldemort still reigns."

He began to enter the sitting room again, wondering if this uncertainty and fear was what the Potters must have felt last time.

Passing one of the mugs to Lily, Severus thought, And to think I was partially responsible for their fates. He shook his head in disgust.

"What's on your mind, Sev?" Lily asked, taking a small sip of the coffee.

He joined her on the couch, sitting on the edge. "Caffeine will help keep us awake, but I doubt it will help my nerves."

"It's all right to be afraid, you know," Lily pointed out quietly. "I admit I'm afraid, Sev."

"You do a good job of hiding it," Severus remarked. He stared at the front door, then turned to face his wife. "Yes, Lily, I am afraid. It would be foolish not to be, but I'm not afraid for my own life. I don't want to see you..." He couldn't finish that sentence.

"Severus," Lily said gingerly. She placed her cup down and was about to take his hand in hers when a bang came from the front door.

Alarmed, Severus and Lily stood.

"Stay there," Severus cautioned.

The door had been blasted away, and someone dressed in a black hooded cloak stepped into the house.

"Voldemort," Severus stated, his wand at the ready. He didn't waste another moment. There was to be no dawdling. A flash of green light issued forth from Severus's wand, aimed directly at the Dark Lord's chest.

Unfortunately, Voldemort stepped out of the way, and the jet of light flew past him and into the night beyond the door.

"Think you're so clever, do you, half-blood filth?" Voldemort sneered. "You think you can beat me?"

Voldemort shot the Killing Curse at Severus, who moved out of the way. He was worried for Lily, who he caught out of the corner of his eye. She was now standing as well and had her wand out.

"No, Lily!" Severus bellowed. "Go! Get out of here!"

"Like hell I'm leaving you!" she yelled back.

Voldemort took this moment to try and hit Lily instead, but luckily, she was fast enough and darted out of the way. Severus struck at the Dark Lord again, but he was too fast.

There wasn't any time to think. Severus wished Lily would simply leave. With her there, he had to try and protect her and fight Voldemort. He knew she wouldn't use the Killing Curse on Voldemort; she had never tried to kill anyone before.

"I killed that traitorous Regulus Black," Voldemort taunted. "Dumbledore, he, and you thought you had me in your grips, but if only your foolish Mudblood knew how to block her mind better, perhaps you'd be safe still!"

Severus didn't reply. He wasn't going to give his old master the satisfaction.

"As it is, you won't be around much longer to be safe in your home, so thoughtfully hidden away-"

Shut up!

Severus slashed his wand through the air and then followed the Sectumsempra with an Avada Kedavra. The first curse caught Voldemort, but he'd already moved mostly out of the way, so it only skimmed his cheek. The green jet of light flew right past.

"Damn it," Severus growled.

"So intent on killing me that you miss the opportunity-" Voldemort yelled, then shot the Killing Curse toward Lily, "-to protect your precious Mudblood!"

"No!" Severus screamed, but then everything happened at once.

Another bang issued forth from near the door. Severus turned in horror as the light sped toward Lily, but she managed to hide behind the sofa, which exploded in a mass of stuffing. A choking noise from the entrance alerted Severus's attention next, and he turned to face Voldemort again, but Voldemort was staggering, his entire face surprised.

There was another bang, and Voldemort fell to his knees, dropping his wand. A couple of seconds later, he fell, face forward, to the floor. Embedded in his back and in the back of his head were two bullets.

Tobias stepped into the entrance and glared down at Voldemort's body.

"Serves you right, you bloody bastard," the older Snape muttered, kicking at Voldemort's shoe.

Voldemort didn't move.

Stunned, Severus was gaping. "F-Father?"

"Yes, Severus?" Tobias asked, almost sounding amused.

Severus pivoted, looking for Lily, who had managed to shield herself from the exploding couch and was standing, brushing the remains of the sofa off herself.

She approached the two men. "I'm okay," she said. Gazing down at Voldemort, she asked, "Is he... dead?"

"I think so," Severus replied cautiously. He pointed his wand and cast Sectumsempra. The curse hit Voldemort and tore his arm from his body, but the blood didn't gush. "He's dead," he confirmed. Looking once again at his father, he asked incredulously, "How- how did you-?"

"It was all over the news, first of all," Tobias began to explain. "The attacks all over Britain. Then, people started talking about a strange man in Manchester who was threatening its citizens. Having the old telly wouldn't have been a bad idea, Severus. I knew I had to come to see you."

Severus didn't argue. Since his father had just killed the most evil wizard of the century, he was grateful and relieved. Lily came to stand by his side, and Severus instinctively reached for her hand.

Well, that certainly changes what the prophecy meant, Severus thought. Exchanging a meaningful look with Lily, he realized that maybe his son wouldn't have been destined to destroy Voldemort after all. Then again, he wasn't about to risk letting the Dark Lord live and wind up killing the boy, anyway.

"I guess carrying that gun around turned out to be a smart idea after all," Severus stated, trying to get over the shock of what had just happened.

Tobias actually laughed. "Guess so," he said. Sobering, he asked, "And you're both okay?"

"I'm fine," Severus replied.

"Just a couple of bumps and bruises," Lily confirmed. "Thank you, Tobias, for, you know, killing him."

"Don't mention it," Tobias replied gruffly. "He was making your lives miserable, right? It was the least I could do, I suppose." He cast his son a strange look, and Severus wondered if the man was trying to apologize for years of past abuse.

"Thanks to you, Father, he's dead. The irony shouldn't be lost on his followers when they find out a Muggle killed their esteemed leader." Severus smirked.

"What do we do now?" Tobias asked, kicking Voldemort's corpse for good measure. "Sure is an ugly fellow."

"Now we notify the correct authorities," Severus stated.

x x x x x

A couple of hours later, after the Aurors had come to remove Voldemort's body, and Dumbledore had been notified and seen the truth for himself, Tobias, Severus, and Lily were gathered in the sitting room. Severus had transfigured an old mattress into a new sofa for the time being.

"I can't believe it's really over. He's really dead," Lily was saying. "I'm relieved, but to be honest, I thought I'd be happier. Is it normal to feel like this?"

"Wars never really have happy endings," Severus supplied. "Too many lives lost. Even old Mad-Eye Moody... and Elphias Doge, who was one of Dumbledore's oldest friends...both dead."

"And the late Prewett brothers' poor sister's family, the Weasleys, lost their father... I didn't know him well, but I'd run into Arthur Weasley a couple of times when I worked at the Ministry. He always seemed like such a nice man," Lily said, shaking her head.

"He died defending his family," Severus said. "Frank Longbottom finished off Bellatrix Lestrange when she tried torturing his son. That's justice."

Tobias gave Severus a confused look, but Severus didn't elaborate.

"Travers, Crabbe, Jugson... all dead, too," Lily added. "The others are on the run."

"Without their leader, won't they disband?" Tobias inquired.

"Since none of them is strong enough to take Voldemort's place, that will happen, yes," Severus stated, "but there will still be a few months before the Aurors - the magical police - capture them all. I wouldn't stop carrying that gun if I were you."

Tobias cradled the gun between his hands and stared down at it. Stowing it away, he stood. "Not a bad idea. I ought to let you two get some sleep, if you can manage it. What a night, eh?"

"Yeah," Lily whispered, standing with Severus to see Tobias out.

"Good night, Dad," Severus said softly, and then he leaned forward and hugged his father.

"Good night, Severus." Tobias, surprised by his son's rare display of affection, returned the hug a little awkwardly.

Lily gave her father-in-law a quick hug, and they saw Tobias out. Now alone, Severus didn't waste another second in hiding his relief and raw emotion. He swept Lily up into his arms and held her closely, burying his face in her hair.

"Thank God you're all right," he rasped.

"There, there, Sev; it's over now," Lily soothed.

Severus withdrew his face and smiled, a tired smile, but a smile nonetheless.

"Yes, Lily, you're right again."

And he kissed her.

Author's Note: (added after the chapter was originally put up) Since a few people have already expressed their dislike of why I chose the method of Voldemort's demise that I did, I felt it necessary to post this, explaining why I chose it, in the hopes that it will help quell any further questions.

The reason Voldemort died by a gun at the hands of a Muggle was for the irony. I realize it's anticlimatic, but that's the point. Voldemort, who for all his efforts to be immortal, was rendered mortal. He used magic to try and prove himself more powerful than others, thinking himself better than Muggles. He underestimated Muggles, and to die by a Muggle would be very ironic and a very humiliating way for him to die. Having Voldemort die by magic and/or by Severus's hand would have been predictable.

There is also a twist on the prophecy. Remember that the characters interpreted it to mean Severus and his kid? Well, it actually meant Tobias and Severus. If you go back and reread it, you'll see that it could have been that way, too.

Just as Voldemort underestimated the power of love in canon and it led to his downfall, so his underestimation of Muggles led to his downfall in this story. If you are disappointed, I do apologize, but when a story is read by so many, I cannot possibly live up to everyone's expectations. I wrote it the way I felt the story was to be told, and in the end, I'm happy with it.

Chapter One Hundred-Twenty

After that fateful night in late January when Tobias had miraculously, almost unbelievably, killed Voldemort with a mere gun, news had spread rampantly, both in the Muggle and wizarding worlds. In the days that followed, the remaining Death Eaters had mostly disbanded. Some fled the country, while others tried to make their mark still, perhaps wishing to show their lasting support for a leader they refused to believe dead because of "some filthy Muggle."

The work was slow and dirty, but the Aurors captured several of the Death Eaters that winter. Without their master, they couldn't hold their cause together. Without someone powerful enough to rally under, their ignorance would get them no where but to a cell in Azkaban.

On a more somber note, those who had given their lives fighting valiantly in the war's last days were paraded as heroes. Their funerals were highly attended, and Severus and Lily were among those present.

Arthur Weasley's had been the most touching and probably the hardest to endure. Even though the Weasleys hadn't been a part of the Order because of their responsibility to a family of small children, most of the Order were friends with them, at least by proxy.

Lily confessed to feeling like she had personally known the Weasleys, and Severus strongly suspected this was because the Weasley family had always given off the impression of what it must feel like to return home to your family after a long journey.

After the formal service, Lily approached Molly Weasley and introduced herself, expressing her heartfelt condolences.

Whilst taking the older woman's hand, Lily was saying, "I'm truly sorry for your loss. You have a charming family."

Molly smiled at Lily. "Thank you," she managed, a couple of tears escaping her eyes.

A boy about four years old tugged on her mum's robe, his glasses too big for his little nose. "Mummy," he complained, "Charlie's saying he won't let me play Quid'ich with Bill and him when we get home."

"Percy, darling, don't you mind your older brothers. Go find Uncle Bilius. He's got Fred and George with him, and I know you love playing with them." Molly gave Lily an apologetic look.

Percy nodded, a little reluctantly, and traipsed off.

"I apologize," she murmured, distracted.

"It's no matter," Lily replied, suddenly feeling an enormous amount of compassion for the woman in front of her.

Molly managed another smile and said, "Dumbledore has told me about you, of course. He spoke highly of you and your husband, and I see you and I have something in common." She indicated her belly, which was larger than Lily's by far.

Lily nodded, smiling, but wondering how Molly would manage on her own. She spotted Severus, who was engaged with Dumbledore and some Healers, and called him over.

"Severus, I'd like you to formally meet Molly Weasley. Molly, this is my husband, who Dumbledore has told you about."

Feeling slightly awkward, Severus took Molly's hand. "I am sorry," he said quietly, but sincerely. "Lily met your husband a few times at the Ministry. He was... very kind. Also very brave."

He wondered if he was being appropriate. Funerals had a tendency of making people feel vulnerable and exposed, and so the natural reaction was to close up. Severus, however, couldn't in good conscience stand there and not tell someone like Molly Weasley the truth.

"He defended us, just like your dad did for you," Molly pointed out shakily.

Severus wondered if Molly was thinking something along the lines of,
But he died, and your father is alive.

Lily took the moment of silence to ask, "When are you due?" The question had been blurted out, and she wondered if she ought not to have said anything so bluntly, but she knew she appreciated trying to find some happiness in times of sorrow and hoped Molly would likewise.

"March first," Molly replied. "Another set of twins, if you'll believe it, only a boy and a girl this time. It runs in Arthur's family."

"Well, congratulations," Lily supplied graciously. Seeing that a group of red-headed people were edging closer, no doubt wishing to speak with Molly, Lily added, "We ought not take all your time. Again, my condolences."

"Don't be a stranger, dear," Molly said. She gazed upon Severus and took his hand, much to his surprise. Giving it a squeeze, she said, "Take care of her and that baby."

Severus nodded and found himself saying, "If you ever need any help-"

"Thank you. Dumbledore was right about you both - what kind people you are."

x x x x x

The Minister had never issued an Order of Merlin to a Muggle, but there was a first for everything. Tobias thought the medal rather gaudy, to be honest, and simply hung it by the mirror in his bedroom after receiving it.

Severus and Lily were among those who received the medals as well, and Severus agreed with his father. For all his desire to have one in the past, it somehow seemed pointless now - just a piece of flair to show off.

x x x x x

That winter produced more snow than Britain had seen in decades. It became harder and harder for Lily to manuever down the pavement, the drifts and piles of snow very high on either side of her, but as February drew to an end, despite her larger belly, the snowfall had relented.

For the first time in weeks, the snow had melted enough to see the old playground clearly. With Death Eaters in custody and feeling it finally safe to do so, Severus and Lily took the long way to Lily's old house and walked by the park.

The breeze whipped around them, blowing scraves and hair. Lily clutched at her scraf and held it down, turning her head toward the playground. Beyond the abandoned poles where the swings used to hang, the bare trees swayed in a frenzied cadance.

"It seems smaller," she remarked, coming to a stop.

Severus halted beside her and took in the scene. "Yes, it does," he agreed. "Everything seems larger when you're a kid."

Lily pointed to some twiggy bushes. "There's where you hid. Of course, the shrubs have grown considerably in almost eleven years." Moving her hand, she redirected her focus. "And just beyond those trees is 'our spot.' My God, it looks so different in the winter."

"Hardly green," Severus said wryly. "The river is frozen over, of course, and has been for weeks. Remember hearing the gushing water as we sat there for what seemed like forever? I'd swear those summers seemed like they would never end. Time to a kid is so different. You think you have forever, and then... time passes, and you find you're on the opposite side of things." Severus smiled gently at this last part and placed a hand on Lily's stomach.

"Do you suppose the old park will be fixed up one day? I'd love for him to be able to play where we did - to be able to tell him that this is where Mummy and Daddy first met."

"Daddy?" Severus asked, amused.

Lily giggled that bell-like laughter, so sweet and pleasing to the ears. "Well, he might call you that."

"True enough, I suppose," Severus replied. "Come, let's continue on. It's still bloody cold out here, and I, for one, would like to get inside."

Lily resumed walking. Once they passed the park, she posed, "So, do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Do you think the playground will be reopened for kids to play in?"

"I don't know, but perhaps we can do something about it when the time comes," Severus supplied.

Lily seemed content with this answer, and they continued to the Evanses' house in companionable silence. Upon reaching their destination, Violet greeted them warmly and invited them inside.

"Would you care for a cup of hot tea, or perhaps hot cocoa?" she offered.

She was wearing her apron, which meant she'd been busy in the kitchen. Violet's hair, which had grown back fully from her days of chemo, was pinned back from her face on either side. The older woman smiled at her daughter's belly, asking, "How is the little guy?"

"Tea would be nice, thank you, Violet," Severus replied.

"I think the cocoa would be delightful," Lily said. "And he's fine. Just fine."

"How many more weeks is it now?" Violet asked, returning to the kitchen and glancing behind her.

"About six, maybe five," Lily replied. "Here, let me help you."

Severus shook his head, slightly amused, and turned when his father-in-law stepped into the room. He shook Severus's hand.

"Ah, women," he joked lightly. "Do you feel ready for the big job of being a father, Severus?"

"I, uh, suppose so," Severus said awkwardly. He had tried to imagine himself holding a baby and found it a foreign feeling, indeed. Excitement was definitely prime among his emotions, but anxiety was also present. "The closer the date, the more nervous I become," he admitted in a quiet voice. "But I am looking forward to it, very much."

"As are we," Ross said with a nod. "I'm glad to see Petunia dating that Sirius Black bloke. We always assumed she'd be married first, what with being the older daughter, but life, I guess, is often full of the unexpected." Sobering, he finished, "I'm just glad that war is over and that you're all safe."

Severus exchanged a smile with Lily, who was engrossed with her mum in conversation and hadn't heard a word of what her husband and father were discussing. "Yes, and we have my father to thank for that."

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By a couple of weeks later, the weather had improved dramatically. The temperatures, although still quite cool, were warm enough to venture outside for longer periods of time, and the increased amount of daylight afforded Lily the time to take walks over to her old house. Since she wasn't yet working, and Severus had returned to his apprenticeship weeks ago, she had a lot of time on her hands.

Petunia had returned to the university, so Lily spent much time with her mother. When she wasn't visiting with Violet, Lily kept in regular contact with Mary and her newly-acquired friend, Molly Weasley. Molly had given birth to twins, a boy and a girl as projected, a couple of weeks ago. From what Lily could understand, both the Weasley and the Prewett extended families were so large, they took care of Molly and her now seven children.

Lily had inquired after Severus if he had known the Weasleys well before, and he had told her what he could.

"They fought in the Order during the second war, and every one of their children was in Gryffindor. They were always targets since they were blood traitors in the eyes of many purebloods, but Arthur Weasley never died last time. I was never close with them, however, if that's what you're asking," Severus had explained.

"So, you've never been to their house?" Lily had asked.

"No," had been his response.

Now arrangements had been made to visit the Burrow. Molly had graciously extended the invitation a week previously, but Lily had wanted to give her some time to adjust to having two more children to look after. When Severus returned home this evening, they would be making a visit to the Weasley household, and Lily was excited at the prospect of seeing the new babies.

When evening came, Severus changed into something more comfortable, and together, they Apparated to Ottery St. Catchpole. Severus knew the Weasleys had never been well-off financially, but their home had a quaintness to it. Being in the countryside, it was endearing to look a little worn. In the city, a house like Spinner's End was not so charming when in a rundown condition.

Molly greeted them warmly and invited them into the sitting room, which was filled with two other adults, cousins of Molly's, and too many children for Severus's liking. He tried not to curl his lip at two toddlers who he knew would grow up to be infamous pranksters went running by, one chasing the other with a regular broom. The two oldest boys, obviously Bill and Charlie, were taunting an irritated Percy with a book on magic spells. The place was a den of disaster for Severus, but to Lily, it was lovely, as she had put it.

"The little ones are asleep right now," Molly explained, "so we'll have a spot of supper, and then you can properly meet them. Let me introduce you properly to the rest of the family..."

While Lily was delighted throughout the whole ordeal, Severus was less than thrilled. Whenever Lily would glance in his direction, he forced a small, pained smile, hoping to God that his child wouldn't be

so unruly. After Molly gushed over her boys, she ordered them to clean up for dinner.

After a large dinner, Molly introduced Severus and Lily to her second set of twins. "This is Ronald, and this is Ginevra," she stated, a caress in her voice.

She passed Ginevra to Lily, who held the little baby girl carefully, the natural mother's instinct taking over. When Molly offered Ronald to Severus, he replied uncomfortably, "Uh, that's okay. I don't think- I don't think I'd be very good at holding him." And how odd that Ginevra would be born early.

"Nonsense," Molly admonished in her typical motherly voice, and Severus wondered why he always felt about ten years old around the woman. "Here, it's easy."

Not giving Severus much of a choice in the matter, she passed her child off on him. Severus awkwardly held the baby, feeling very strange indeed. He couldn't help but look at the slumbering boy, who he had known as one of Harry Potter's friends and a trouble-making teenager.

"See? You're a natural, Sev," Lily lightly teased. Looking at Molly, she remarked, "You have beautiful children, Molly. I'm sorry I didn't get to know you sooner."

"That's all right, dear," Molly replied, smiling indulgently at the young married couple across from her. "You'll have one of your own soon. Perhaps they can be playmates."

Severus's stomach twisted in his discomfort. The meal had been too heavy, and although Molly Weasley was known for her excellent ability at cooking, he had always declined staying after Order meetings when the rest of the Order would gratefully partake in her meals.

"Have you thought of a name for your little one?" Molly inquired a moment later.

"Er, a name?" Severus asked, stunned out of his discomfiture.

"Not yet," Lily admitted, amused at her husband's remark. "But I'm sure we'll think of something."

Later that evening, when they were back home, Lily posed the question. "What would you like to name him, Sev?"

"Certainly not 'Severus.' I dislike the thought of a junior or any other ridiculous nicknames he might acquire, such as 'Bud,' because of it."

"Could we use your name for his middle name, at least? I like your name, and it's common to give the eldest son his dad's name as his middle one."

"That would be fine," Severus confessed.

Severus pondered what name would be appropriate for their child. He thought for some time, and Lily left him to it. Finally, he suggested, "What about 'Evan?' He's your child, too, Lily, and if he's to share my name with his middle and last names, I think he ought to bear your maiden name as his given one. Of course, 'Evans' would need to be 'Evan' to work right-"

Lily beamed. "I think it's perfect, Sev. 'Evan Severus Snape.' I like it."

"Evan," Severus murmured, a smiling slowly creeping onto his lips. He placed a hand on Lily's belly as she lay curled up against him on the bed. "Hello, Evan," he said to the baby.

Suddenly, the day's venture to the Burrow hadn't been so stressful after all.

x x x x x

During the Easter holidays, Petunia returned from the university to spend time with her family. She seemed to be in a particularly good mood that Saturday, and while Lily and Severus were visiting for lunch, Lily took notice of this.

After the meal, she pulled her sister aside. "Is something going on that I should know about, Tuney?" she asked.

"It might be," Petunia replied airily, completely out of character for her.

"I see," Lily remarked wryly. "Does it involve a date with one Sirius Black tonight?"

"You should say that," Petunia said vaguely. Finally looking directly into her sister's eyes, she added, "I'll need to be getting upstairs - I can't possibly go in these rags."

Lily snorted lightly. "I'd hardly call what you're wearing 'rags,' Petunia, but whatever you say, dear sister." Smiling, Lily watched as her sister turned and went upstairs.

When she returned to the dining room, Severus asked, "What was that about?"

"Petunia has a date with Sirius tonight." Gazing at her parents, she questioned, "You don't think-?"

"We suspect there might be something big coming, yes," Ross said. "Sirius seems the old-fashioned type in some respects."

Did Black come to them to ask Petunia's hand in marriage? Severus wondered. He flushed a little, wondering now if he ought to have done likewise, but he didn't seem to need to have won over the approval of Lily's parents, as they had been fond of him for years before that.

"In any case," Violet interjected. "Tomorrow is Easter, and I'll need your help getting things ready, Lily... if that's all right. Seeing as Petunia will be otherwise occupied-"

"Gladly," Lily agreed, just happy to see Petunia in good spirits. "Although," she said, standing awkwardly, "I may not be of much assistance. Severus has taken to teasing me at home about waddling and not being able to bend over far enough."

Severus smiled, embarrassed. "Only teasing because I care, Lily." He stood. "I can help you as well, Violet."

Several hours later, when the Evanses and the Snapes were done preparing the house and food for tomorrow (with the aid of magic), they were gathered around the telly. The first Star Wars movie was making its television debut, and Lily's father had been a closet fan for the past three years. He cheered at all the exciting parts, and Severus couldn't help but wonder what the big deal was.

The front door opened, and Petunia entered, followed by Sirius. Severus wondered if the evening had gone as expected, and by the ridiculously large smile on Petunia's normally scowling face, he assumed it had.

He didn't have to assume for long, because Petunia stepped into the sitting room, exclaiming, "Sirius asked me to marry him!"

Imagine that, Severus thought sardonically, but as the rest of the family stood to offer their congratulations, he joined them.

Lily was embracing her sister tightly, and Ross was enthusiastically shaking Sirius's hand. Severus met Sirius's eye for a moment and raised an eyebrow.

Well, this is certainly going to prove most interesting, Severus thought.
x x x x x

Four days after Easter, April 10, Lily went into labor.

A hurried travel to St. Mungo's via Apparition had been the fastest way of getting there. Now, Lily was in the delivery room, surrounded by several Healers and their assistants. Severus was the nervous father who couldn't sit still if he tried, and although he was training to be a Healer, he didn't have the knowledge to assist, and not knowing how to help was frustrating.

"Just try to relax, Mr. Snape," one of the Healers, a man in his forties with dark blonde hair and a beard said soothingly, much to Severus's annoyance. "Everything is proceeding accordingly, so don't fret."

I'm not fretting, Severus wanted to argue.

He wished he could see Lily better, but since she was surrounded by others, he was kept at a short distance.

Lily was grateful for the invention of pain potions, but the delivery was still longer than she imagined. She pushed with everything she had, and when a small baby's cry went up in the room, she thought her heart might burst with joy.

"Keep pushing, now," one of the Healers instructed. "You're almost there."

Severus crept closer and eased his way into the gathered Healers, until he could see clearly. Lily was covered in sweat, but the baby's cry had undone him. He wanted to witness this miracle... the birth of his son.

My God... my son. My son.

Severus felt beyond amazement. Everything felt so surreal.

Soon enough, the baby had emerged. The first thing Severus noticed was black hair covering his little head. He had a good set of lungs, too, for he cried loudly, and he was red in the face.

The Healers cleaned him off and wrapped him in a blanket, handing him to Lily, who took the baby in her arms like he was the most precious treasure in the world.

Severus moved to the side of the bed and leaned over his wife and child. Lily's eyes were glistening with tears of elation. Severus reached out a hand and smoothed it over the baby's hair, then down his cheek.

"He's so soft," he murmured.

"He's beautiful," Lily whispered, kissing the baby. "Hello, Evan... little Evan Severus," she spoke to the baby softly. "Welcome to the world."

"Dear God, Lily," Severus breathed. "We did it."

Lily smiled widely up at her husband. "We did it together, Sev."

Severus sat on the edge of the bed and wrapped an arm around Lily, pulling her and Evan closer. Unable to fully comprehend how he had gotten so lucky - no, so blessed - in this life, Severus thanked God and silently promised to cherish the two most important people to him the rest of his life.

Thank you for giving me another chance.

Author's Note: We're almost there, folks! Just the epilogue to go!

Artwork for this chapter is here: <http://sindie11.deviantart.com/art/Severus-with-Pregnant-Lily-91073361> (remove spaces)

Artwork for chapter 118 is here: (colored by LilyHBP) <http://sindie11.deviantart.com/art/1980-81783026> (remove spaces)

Epilogue

Eleven Years Later

The Muggle and Wizarding Worlds after the fall of Voldemort became one world, more or less. With the breach of the Statute of Secrecy, the Ministries had worked together in the hopes of coming to an agreement. The biggest threat to Muggles had been the biggest threat to wizards and witches as well, and if Muggles understood that, it would help pave the road to peace.

Platform Nine and Three-Quarters had since become a place of great awe to Muggles, especially on the last day of August every year. The magical folk gathered there and mysteriously disappeared through the magical barrier.

Among those standing on the platform on this last day of August was a family of three: Severus, Lily, and their son, Evan, who would be starting his first year at Hogwarts.

"When d'you suppose they'll be here?" Evan asked, practically begging, his large green eyes staring hopefully up at his parents.

"I always thought you should've taught him a little more patience," a strict voice intervened.

Lily turned around to find Petunia standing there. She smiled at her sister.

"Ah, Tuney, I'm glad you could make it," Lily said. "Of course, you know Evan has always been on the anxious side."

"I'm always telling her to relax more," a male's voice teased, and Lily and Petunia pivoted to see Sirius joining them, two children in tow.

Evan was surveying his cousins, Torsten and Alexandria. Torsten was a boy of eight, who had light brown hair and his father's handsome looks. He was like a Sirius Junior, much to Severus's dismay. Alexandria, who went by Lexi, was only six, and resembled Petunia at that age, only she was surprisingly shy.

"Were you inquiring after your cousins, Evan?" asked Severus dryly, smiling.

"Well, no... Oh, Dad, you know who I mean!" Evan exclaimed indignantly, jumping in place.

Severus stilled his son by placing a hand on his shoulder. "Calm down, Evan. I'm sure the Potters will be here any moment."

Severus refrained from rolling his eyes, although just barely. Evan was quite a mix of his parents, both in looks and attitude. His hair was long and black, just like Severus's, but every time Severus saw his son's eyes, he was happy to see he had inherited one of Lily's best features. As the boy had grown older, Evan's nose had taken on its form more, and although it was noticeably smaller than his father's, it curved in a way just enough to be called hooked. Still, Severus thought Evan to be a handsome boy.

Lily was talking with her sister, and Sirius was caught up with the kids. Severus shook his head, remarking, "Got your hands full, do you, Sirius?"

"Always," Sirius replied as Alexandria quietly whined about something.

"They're not going to Hogwarts for a long time yet," Evan stated proudly. "What house do you think I'll be in?"

This got Lily's attention.

"It doesn't matter to us, Evan, dear. You know that. Of course, I think your father would be very proud if you were in Slytherin. He wanted me to be, you know," she said with a wink.

Severus didn't think Evan would be in Slytherin. He was a mixture of a Ravenclaw and a Hufflepuff, more likely.

"Considering your best friend will probably be sorted into Gryffindor, you had better make sure you're prepared," Severus intoned seriously.

"But you and Mum got on just fine being where you were," Evan pointed out.

"Sev," Lily whispered into his ear, "don't frighten him."

"He's not frightened," Severus replied, watching as the Potters walked up to Evan.

Severus would never quite get over what he had already witnessed so many times. His son was best friends with the Potters' son.

Who would have thought, my son and Harry Potter, best friends? Severus wondered.

The Weasleys weren't too far behind, nor were the Longbottoms. Although Ron and Ginny had been friends with Evan and Harry, the two boys had been inseparable for years. A bossy voice caught Severus's attention, and he turned to see a bushy-haired girl with large front teeth ordering her parents along.

"Come on, Mum and Dad! We don't have all day! I can't possibly miss the train!" she was shouting.

Evan exchanged a look with Harry and burst out laughing. "Nutters, that one," Evan remarked.

"Be kind, Evan," Lily admonished. "You may become friends with that girl yet. From the looks of it, she's Muggleborn. I know what that's like. She's probably just trying to fit in."

"I was only joking," Evan replied innocently.

"Did you see her teeth?" Harry asked Evan, laughing.

Severus raised his eyebrows. This Harry Potter was most certainly a lot more like his father than the original one - both in looks and because of his teasing of others and joking at their expense. He sometimes wished Evan wasn't as close to him, but he knew Evan was a good influence on Harry.

"Be kind, Harry," Evan parroted at his friend.

Taking notice of the time, Lily said, "You'd best be getting on board." She kissed Evan, saying, "Be good. Write as soon as you can."

"I will. I promise, Mum." Evan gave Lily a quick hug and turned to his father.

While others were saying goodbye to their children, Severus and Evan faced each other. Severus gave his son a hopeful smile.

"You'll be brilliant, whatever house you're in," Severus told him. "I know you'll make us proud. You already have."

"Thanks, Dad." Evan hugged his father, and Severus patted the boy on the back.

"Run along, now," Severus said, watching Evan do just that, as he suddenly seemed eager to catch up to his friends.

Severus then watched as an eleven-year-old Draco Malfoy ran to get on the train before it left. Narcissa had been fussing over him as she always had before, and Severus silently shook his head, reflecting how some things never changed.

The train whistled as the clock struck eleven o'clock and pulled out of the station. As parents waved goodbye to their children, Severus wrapped an arm around Lily and pulled her close.

"Can you believe it? He's already going off to Hogwarts," Lily said.

"He has grown up fast," Severus replied. "Sometimes too fast."

"I always thought time a rather strange thing," Lily stated.

Somehow, Severus thought he knew exactly what she meant.

"It's like coming full circle... back to the moment it began."

The End

Author's Note: A million thanks to all my readers and reviewers over the past year and a half! Wow, I cannot believe this story is over! Trust me, when I set out to write it, I never expected it to get this long. If you haven't reviewed but have been reading, a review of the final story would be much appreciated. Thank you again!!

I would also like to wish everyone a merry Christmas! Consider this your Christmas present from me.

If that weren't enough, please check out a tribute video I made of this story: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOPdVGbXI9g&feature=channel_page (remove spaces or look for the link on my profile page). That's a double gift!

I will not be writing a sequel. I'm sorry. If you're really interested in a sequel, please check out Toffee Pop's *iEvan Snape: King of Hogwarts*./i She based that fic off of mine, but there are some differences, as she wrote it before I finished this.

I would like to extend a special thank you to Matt Quinn, who has offered his support, advice, and help when writing. If you haven't yet read his fic, *The Wrath of the Half-Blood Prince*, please do so!

Torsten, the name of Sirius's son, is a nod to my best friend, Deb. She knows the context. :wink: I love you, Deb!

Thank you all so very much! It's been my honor and privilege to have written this story for you!

I'm now going to be working on my original story.

Signing off... Sindie

P.S. This chapter has been slightly altered since its original posting to include mention of Draco.